STARCRAFT II IS HERE!

8 PAGES OF SCREENS, INTERVIEWS, AND GAMEPLAY ANALYSIS INSIDE!

"HELL, IT'S ABOUT TIME!"

PAGE 34

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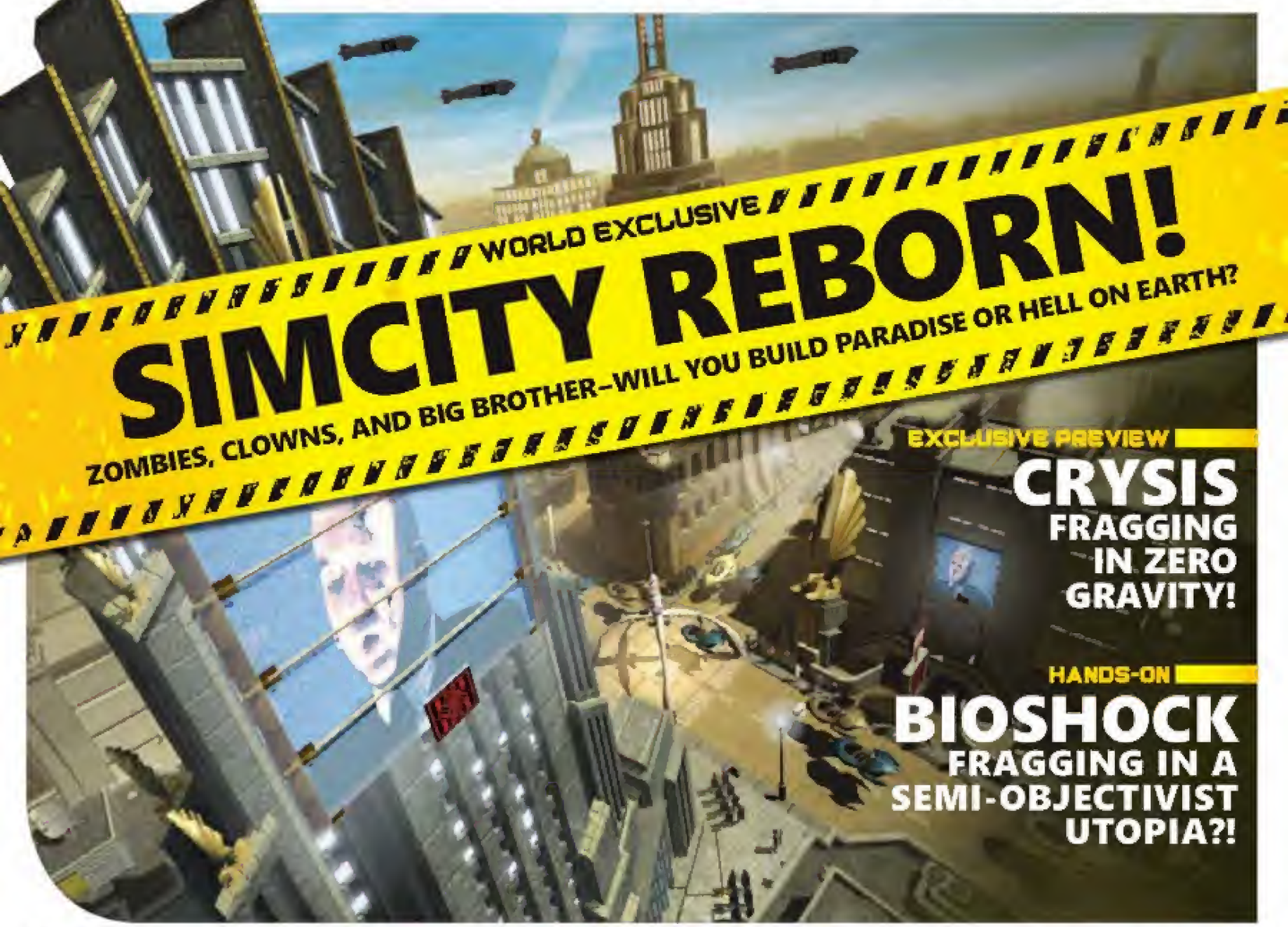

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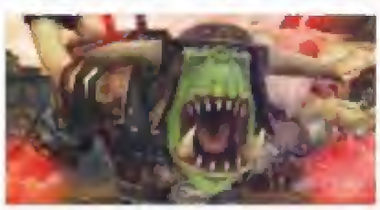

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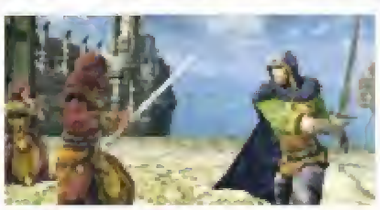
WARHAMMER ONLINE

WAAAAAAAAGH!



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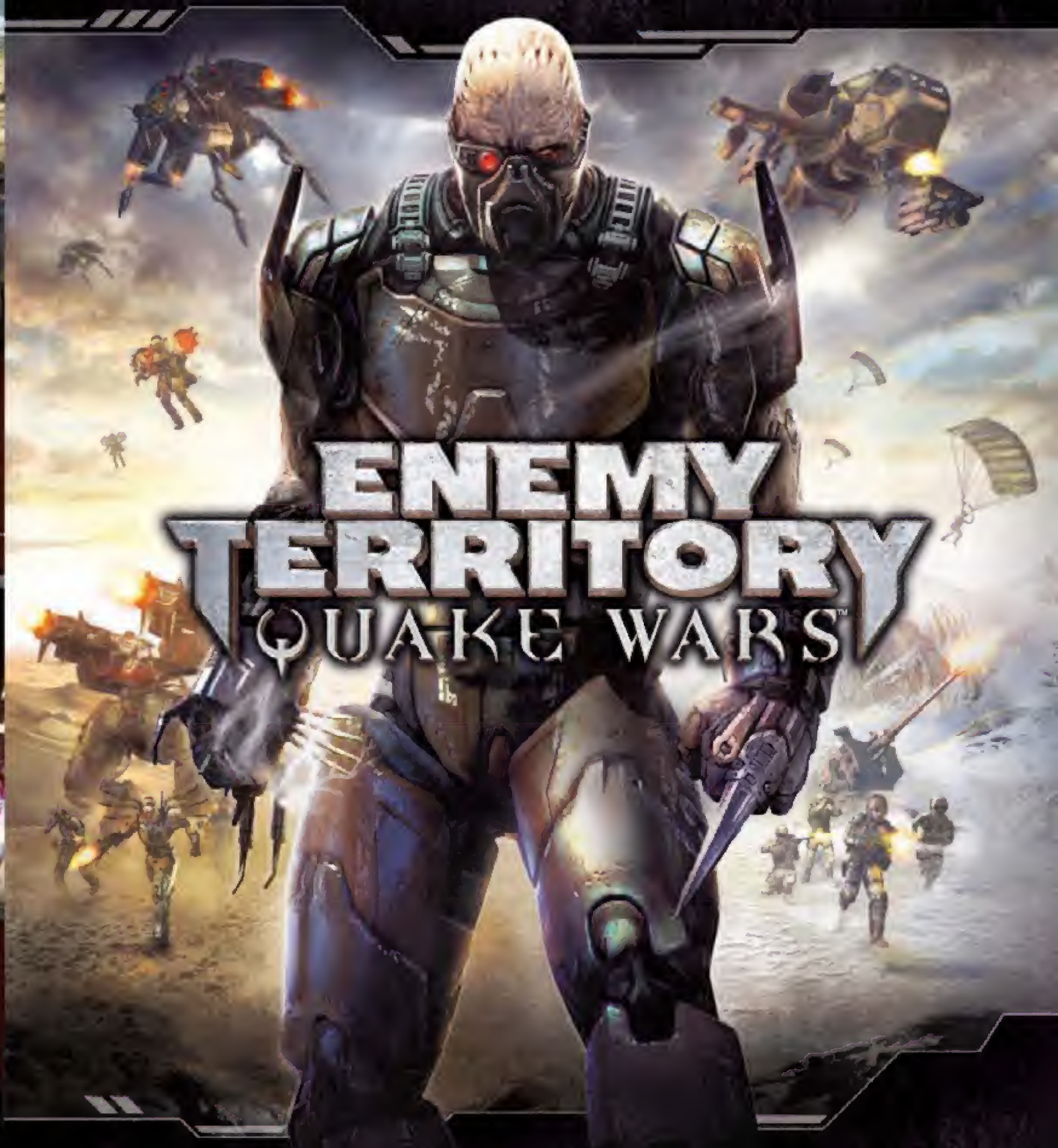

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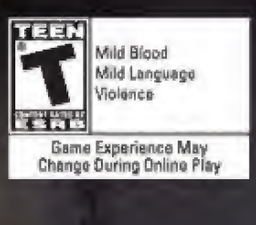

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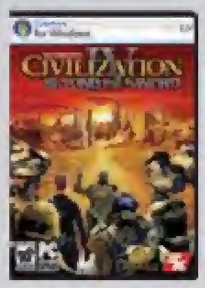

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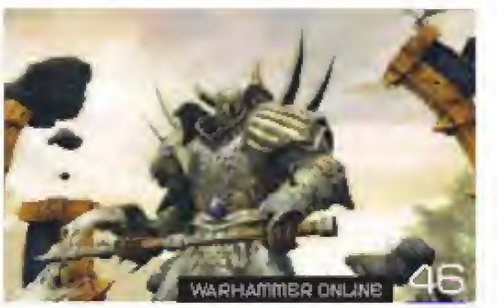

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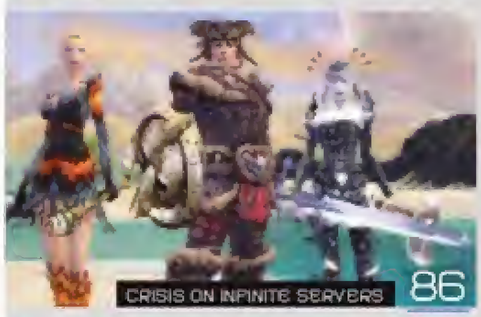

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XTRAS

THIS MONTH ON GFW08.1UP.COM

Get more tasty info, in newfangled video and audio form, on *SimCity Societies*, plus *StarCraft II* news from South Korea, and a special visit to Irrational Games for a peek at *BioShock*.

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ZERG RUSH!

Two old franchises return; one editor swoons with joy

Here's an interesting fact for you! My job is easier than 99.9 percent of all jobs on this planet. Only those people who get paid to sleep by dream researchers have it better, I think. I admit that I don't always appreciate my good fortune, though. No, quite often I get lost in the day-to-day hassles of the job, the real-world challenges of the magazine business, the deadlines, and I forget how lucky I am to work here.

This month, however, is different. I've been so geeked out working on this issue that I've had no choice but to admit to myself how fun it is to work here. Why such happy thoughts? New medication might be one reason. But another would be the previews of two of my favorite franchises of all time. The first, of course, is *StarCraft II*, announced on May 19 to a screaming horde of fanatics in South Korea. We sent 1UP.com executive editor and *StarCraft* junkie James Mielke to the event, where he saw the game firsthand and scored a great, in-depth interview with lead producer Chris Sigaty. Don't miss it—we've got some awesome details here that you won't read about anywhere else. (And raise your hand if you're like me and find yourself addicted to the original *StarCraft* all over again....)

And the second big source of my happiness is our cover story, the first-ever look at the brand-new *SimCity* game. Yeah, yeah, I hear you: The last game, *SimCity 4*, released way back in 2003, wasn't that exciting. But that's why EA has gone back to the drawing board on this one and wholly reinvented the game. A good idea? A moronic one? Time will tell, of course—but in the meantime, the developers' goals are interesting ones, and resident SimGeek Ryan Scott asked 'em all the right questions. (And keep your eyes peeled to 1UP.com for some great gameplay footage that should be up by the time you read this.)

There's more—lots more!—great stuff in the issue, so I urge you to drop whatever you are doing and proceed forthwith immediately! Me, I have some *StarCraft* to attend to. Zerg rush FTW! KEKEKE!

Jeff Green
Editor-in-Chief
Games for Windows: The Official Magazine

Now Playing: *StarCraft, The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar, Pinball FX (XBLA)*
1UP.com Blog: GFWJeff.1UP.com

MEET THE STAFF

SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR

In preparation for *BioShock*, Sean picked up the copy of *The Fountainhead* he bought seven years ago and never read—and proceeded to not read it again.

Now Playing: *World of WarCraft, StarCraft: Brood War, LOTR Online*
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES/TECH)

In preparation for *Halo 2 Vista*, Darren picked up a copy of *Halo: The Flood*—a novel inspired by the game—and proceeded to slowly stab out his eyes with a dull pencil.

Now Playing: *AirmA, Sam & Max: Season 1, Overlord, Halo 2 Vista*
1UP.com Blog: GFWDarren.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS/EXTEND)

In preparation for the next season of *Heroes*, Ryan's been playing *City of Villains* nonstop. If you're on the Justice server, give a shout-out to Doc Clockwork, the Rogue Isles' newest mad scientist.

Now Playing: *City of Villains, LOTR Online*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (START)

In preparation for *Lord of the Rings Online*, Shawn picked up the copy of *The Hobbit* that Sean pushed on him seven minutes ago—and proceeded to leave it in the dentist's office with Ayn Rand and *Highlights*.

Now Playing: *AirmA, LOTR Online*
1UP.com Blog: GFWShawn.1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

In preparation for reading Sean's *BioShock* story, Michael's been reading *Atlas Shrugged*. He's still wondering, who is John Galt? And who the hell is that scary little girl jumping around on the deep-sea diver?

Now Playing: *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*
1UP.com Blog: GFWMichael.1UP.com

ROSEMARY PINKHAM
JUNIOR DESIGNER

Rosie thinks you should go check out her first cover story design ever! Oh yeah, and while you're at it, you can prepare yourself for the new *SimCity* game.

Now Playing: Her DS. Duh.
1UP.com Blog: GFWRosie.1UP.com

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Letters

This month featuring special guests W, T, and F

LETTER OF THE MONTH

MONEY CHANGES EVERYTHING

I feel betrayed when I read the opinion of [*Blizzard's*] Chris Metzen ("In the Eye of the Storm," *GFW* #7, pg. 48). From what I can understand—correct me if I am wrong—I feel like his opinion is just confirming that it seems [Blizzard] is so wrapped up and so deep in appeasing the crowd of *World of WarCraft* [fans] that they are abandoning any developments on future *WarCraft* series. They have to remember that some of the players in *WOW* came from *WarCraft III* (just like me). It seems like Blizzard's just the same as any other big corporation. The bottom line: It's all about profit.

Bryan Herman

Well, we'll partly correct you. Yes, Mr. Metzen is wrapped up in *WOW* (among other things). MMOs are a long-term commitment. And to be honest, we were actually reassured by his statement that he—and, by extension, Blizzard—was in *WOW* for the long haul. (We <3 *World of WarCraft*...can you tell?) And now that *StarCraft II* is a reality (see pg. 34), and it's an old-school RTS, that just affirms that it's not just about the big ol' monthly fee after all. Unless, um, they turn around and announce a big ol' monthly fee after all....

RE: J. GREEN'S INFERNAL REVIEW

I am seriously concerned for Jeff Green's health and well-being. *Infernal* [*GFW* #7, pg. 69], while being pretty cheesy, was loads of fun to experiment within levels. But my concern is regarding his statement about having to call the company for help. I hope that was a joke, because if it was not then either a) he is too damn old to be reviewing videogames, b) his medication needs to be adjusted, or c) he is way too stupid to have this job and should find [a position] more appropriate to his skill level, such as [that of] a Wal-Mart greeter or that guy who gathers up the carts from the parking lot. My 11-year-old finished it in five hours and she could use the job.

Martin Fee

Jeff Green responds: I may be old and stupid, but I also have pictures of my boss naked with a goat. So I'm not leaving here anytime soon. Meanwhile, your 11-year-old may be smarter than me, but you weren't smart enough to not buy *Infernal* in the first place. So I win.

THE WORLD IS A VAMPIRE...

...sent to drain. At least the corporate world is a vampire. And you can bet they stay up late trying to figure out how to drain every last penny available.... The latest two insidious profit schemes come from Microsoft and the producers of *Hellgate: London*. The fact that these two are at each other's throats trying to decide who gets to skin us first only heightens the irony and the sense of impending doom that hovers over Internet gaming as we remember it.

You stupid freaking gamers, wanting to buy a game like *Diablo II* and play it forever without paying...you stupid slobs. Those days are over. We are all funded by venture capitalists or huge media corporations. They are all out to get rich. How do you get rich? Monthly fees, bitches. Don't worry about what game it is. If it is corporate-sponsored, there will be fees. They may be hidden, we may lie and get publicity, we may get your hopes up. But in the end...you are gonna pay.

Chris Lillja

Geez, what's with all the cynicism? That's the second "corporate pigs" letter this issue (see Letter of the Month)! What are ya, red or something?!

We actually see where you're coming from in these cases. Sorta. Let's couch that a bit: GFW Live (we presume that's what you're ranting about) is, at least at this point, all potential energy. If you don't have an Xbox 360, we don't see any good reason to fork over the cash for Gold right now. *Hellgate: London*'s monthly fee is entirely optional. You can still play "a game like *Diablo II* and play it forever." You just get *more* if you opt in for the $10 a month. For new monthly content, that fee is totally justifiable (assuming the content is healthy enough, of course). It's basically an alternative to the expansion pack model. For stuff like the ability to fast-travel places...OK, well, that seems a bit funky. But we presume that stuff's there to make the monthly fee palatable in months where the extra content will almost inevitably be a bit "thin." An interesting experiment Flagship's trying, to be sure.

ON THE SUBJECT OF MILK

So what the hell was making Robert Ashley so uncomfortable when checking out *The Witcher* [*GFW* #6, pg. 24]? The game sounds really freakin' cool, and by the screenshots, it *looks* good, too. I'm not sure how the anatomy of the female body can make someone feel uncomfortable and result in an odd preview article, unless, of course, you're not used to the concept...if you know what I mean.

Mike "KillerPX" Lovall

We observe an awkward silence.

Want to damn us with faint praise? Make us faint with your damn praise? Write to GFWletters@ziffdavis.com.

MAIL BYTES

Eighty years old and still gaming! I started at about age 57 with the Atari desktop with two typed pages' (worth) of memory. The big game was shooting at spacecraft that looked like bow ties. I now enjoy *Call of Dutys*, *Flyboys Squadrons*, and other war games.

Leo Hinkel

According to a recent poll by me that didn't actually take place, younger gamers don't want a *Second Life*, they want dragons and gnomes and the subsequent gnome-punting that ensues. It's not any surprise that a game called *Second Life* appeals to older people whose first lives aren't anything glorious.

Tim Ashwood

Am [I] the only one unsatisfied with "hero" units in RTS games? Ever since *WarCraft III* came out, the genre has let me down. I am so unbelievably happy that Blizzard is taking us back to the RTS glory days!

ManillaGorilla

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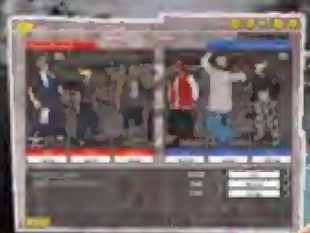

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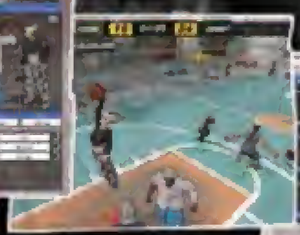

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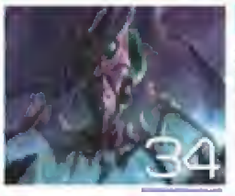

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The mysterious relationship between Big Daddies and Little Sisters is at *BioShock*'s core.

"We should make a *BioShock: Objectivist Utopian Edition* where everything worked out perfectly," jokes Irrational founder Ken Levine, who's been lambasted by hardcore objectivist philosophers on *BioShock*'s message board. "'Hey, how are you? What's up? I'm very economically well off and creatively fulfilled. How about you?'"

Splicers haunt the ruins of Rapture and wield powers similar to your own.

BIOSHOCK

What it is, what it isn't

DEVELOPER: **Irrational Games** PUBLISHER: **2K Games** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter**
RELEASE DATE: **August**

HANDS-ON

Strange signals emanate from Irrational Games. Poll the general populace with "So, what the heck is *BioShock*?" and you'll hear, "Oh, you poor dear, it's *so many* things. It's the spiritual successor to *System Shock 2*. It's the world's first Ayn Rand–ian objectivist role-playing action adventure. It's *Atlas Shrugged*, only underwater, so suppose Poseidon shrugged instead. It's warrior-poet-designer-founder Ken Levine's art-deco ode to nihilism and hubris, it's a cautionary tale of science gone wrong, it's artificial intelligence, it's algorithmic ecosystem, it's man's inhumanity to man, it's *emergent*, it's *innovative*, it's got the *best water anyone has ever seen*...."

"It's a shooter," says Ken Levine, popping open an edamame pod.

THE EMERGENCE INDICATOR

Sitting in Irrational's loungey "Red Room," Levine sets aside his sushi ("I get the same thing for lunch every day") and holds out his hands as far as his arms will reach, an imaginary meter stick measuring in-game freedom.

"If *Grand Theft Auto* is here," Levine says, indicating the extreme left, "and *Half-Life 2* is here," waggling his fingers at the far right, "then *BioShock* is *here*," an inch or two away from the make-believe mark he just made for Valve's magnum opus. He moves his fingers a few centimeters closer to the *HL2* side and makes another mark for *Metroid Prime*, Nintendo's GameCube first-person shooter-adventure, offering it as a pretty close comparison—only *BioShock* comes without the goofy control scheme or quite as much backtracking.

BioShock's opening sequence plays out like the first few minutes of *Lost*: A plane crashes in the middle of the ocean, and you wake up in the water surrounded by violent, flaming fuselage. Only instead of an island, your haven is the tip-of-the-iceberg entrance to Rapture, a submerged citadel constructed by a mad, rich genius named Andrew Ryan seeking to engineer utopia. Retro-future PeopleMovers shuttle you into the depths, another iteration of *Half-Life*'s infamous tram ride, and the submerged scenery juxtaposes neon signs with humpback whales. Darkness envelops you, and an archival orientation film (echoing *Fallout* and predating even the Hanso Foundation) explains the who, what, and why of Rapture. The film ends, the lights brighten, and an enraged mutant-zombie-man-thing tries to shatter your elevator window—making it instantly clear that Ryan's utopian blueprint was missing a few rivets. As if you hadn't assumed it already.

My own preconceptions, coupled with the *Metroid* comparison, probably explain why I'm confused when Levine refers to this as "the first level"—a term usually reserved for those damn *linear* games, which *BioShock* isn't, or so I've heard. But that's for lack of a better term: "Level" here stands for "thematic area," and players are indeed free to move back and forth between sections of Rapture at will—mostly to revisit previously inaccessible nooks and crannies for more gene tonics and plasmids (*BioShock* parlance for passive traits and active powers).

This world appears to have ended right on New Year's Eve. Early on, I'm accosted by a posthuman partygoer dressed for a masquerade ball, only with murder on the mind instead of merriment. "Visual storytelling is very important to us," says Levine. "That you can sense what happened in the city, you can really follow a lot of what happened just by looking around you.... I'm not a fan of cut-scenes; I'm not a fan of making people read. If you have to basically go to a text file to tell backstory, you've lost already."

A few swipes with the wrench I just found among the champagne glasses, conveniently discarded audio diaries, and other postparty detritus, and I'm in familiar territory—my first melee weapon in hand, my first pistol can't be far behind. >

RAPTURE AND YOU

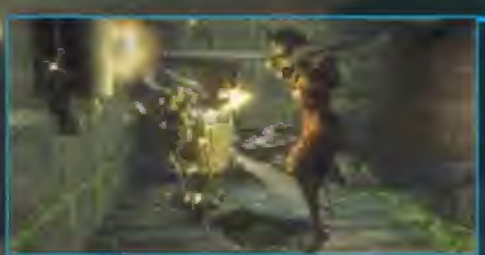
Rapture's halls and chambers are as much your weapon as your shotgun and magic fingers. Here are just a few ways you can use the environment to your advantage.

OIL SLICKS

Spot a greasy, rainbow-refracting stain on the ground, and you can set it ablaze with any number of incendiary catalysts. Unfortunately, the oil goes only where the designers intend—you can't generate oil spills yourself by dumping out barrels. "That's *BioShock 2*," laughs Irrational's Ken Levine.

WATER

It's elemental rock-paper-scissors: Set a foe on fire with your fingertips, watch him flee toward a nearby pool of seawater, then shock the water with your electric hands to fry him.



TURRETS

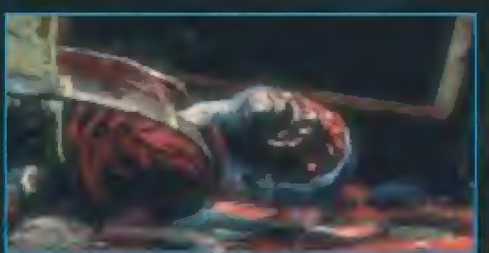
Find a way to avoid detection so you can get close enough to one of these mounted machine guns (sometimes hidden, as in the Fisheries level, where it's tucked beneath the dock), and you can engage in a hacking minigame (resembling the old puzzler *Pipe Dream*) to turn the turret against your enemies. Purchase "engineering" gene tonics to increase your skill, and—if you're skilled enough—skip the minigame.

YOUR ENEMIES

The Splicers themselves are as much a part of the environment as anything. Use Enrage to send them into a confused frenzy, unable to discern friend from foe. A lovely distraction.

BOTS AND TERMINALS
Shock a flying robot to fry its circuits, then reprogram it to serve as a sentry. Pile on proximity mines, and you've got a kamikaze death machine.

EXPLOSIVE DEBRIS
Some objects in Rapture explode on their own when telekinetically hurled. Others—like the ubiquitous FPS barrel—need a little coaxing. Load up loose debris with proximity mines, then toss it at your foe with telekinesis to create a junkyard superbomb.



MEDICAL STATIONS
They dispense health if you've got the cash, but the Splicers know that, too—and will run to heal themselves if they're low on energy. With the right amount of hacking, you can make the machine dispense poison instead.

• Each weapon has three ammo types, one of which is invertible by the player. Examples include electric buckshot for the shotgun and an electrocuting gel for the flamethrower.

Currency comes in the form of straight-up cash (found by rummaging through dead Splicers' pockets, discarded purses, and so on) and "Adam," the biogenetic siphoned-from-sea-slugs substance harvested by the Little Sisters, *BioShock*'s ubiquitous living dead dolls. Spend coin to purchase ammo, health packs, and more in conveniently located vending machines; spend Adam to purchase power-up slots—slots to hold plasmid-granted psychic abilities, slots to hold weapon-wielding talents, slots to hold "hacking" abilities to disable traps and power up turrets—so rather than building a character, you're building the *potential* for a character.

Gene-splicing terminals as commonplace as ATMs allow you to swap abilities in and out of these slots, so if you want to shoot lighting from your hands one day and have the sharpshooting skills of La Femme Nikita the next, that's all part of the plan. I put away my incendiary fingertips, strap on telekinesis and a shotgun, and nix any lingering notions that *BioShock* is an RPG. It's got "elements," yeah, but they're atoms, not polychemical compounds.

The plasmids themselves seem to be conveniently located just where you'd need them. Find a genetic splice that lets you shoot fire from your fingertips not too far from the giant mass of impassable frozen pipes. Encounter a doorway blocked with rubble, and telekinesis is only a hundred or so steps away—*BioShock*'s more versatile versions of the Blue Key.

IT'S ELEMENTAL

Fire and lightning, shotguns and wrenches. I'm surprised by how few surprises *BioShock* holds until I bump into my first Big Daddy lumbering down the hall—the ubiquitous diving suit–clad juggernaut whose visage has served as *BioShock*'s front since day one—and accompanying Little Sister. And despite the pair's tabloid overexposure, just spotting him as I round the corner is intimidating, thrilling, unsettling, and awesome, in the lost sense of the word. I stand still and let them lumber past me—they see I'm there, living and breathing, and just don't care. Little Sister gleefully scuttles to a corpse to extract its precious Adam; moral ooginess creeps in as I contemplate what I'm about to do.

Bullets barely scratch Big Daddy, as the 180-degree health arc over his head indicates. I nearly spend all my ammo to eke out a mere 10 percent of his health—a sure sign I'm doing something wrong. Telekinesis flings a nearby explosive canister at his face; it makes a dent, but not enough to turn the tide. I run past a mad plastic surgeon and Enrage him (a plasmid that turns foe into frenzied "friend"), and he immediately starts tossing his grenades toward Daddy. While the two exchange blows, I contemplate luring them to the flooded operating room I'd recently liberated down in the basement. I construct an ingenious chain of events in my head: Set mad scientist on fire, watch him flee to the water to extinguish the flames, wait for Big Daddy to follow his quarry, and then shock the both of them to hell with an electric bolt from my fingers—till I realize I left my lightning hands back at the bank. I panic and continue to hurl assorted heavy things at him instead. So *this* is *BioShock*, then.

"At E3 last year, the water was just beautiful water," says Levine. The environmental back-and-forth is exactly what he's aiming for—even though he admits the specific elemental fire-water-electricity interaction wasn't part of the original design. "Then a lot of people asked me, 'But does the water have any gameplay?' And I said, 'No, it's thematic, and it's beautiful, so shut up.' Then we went back and said, 'What gameplay effect *could* it have?' If the player has an expectation about how something should work in the world, then we should fulfill that expectation."

Big Daddy goes down—my second-to-last shotgun shell knocks off the last few pixels—and I walk over to Little Sister to engage in *BioShock*'s bid at morality: Siphon out her life force and use it to buy more power-up slots, or free her and let her scuttle off to a mysterious *somewhere* that, Levine hints, will pay off later. Incremental power now, or mysterious hypermagic later? I choose "power now" and let her body crumple to the ground like a doll. It's a little nauseating—this is what the Splicers do, maniacal and mutated, and the line blurs between us and them.

"They're roving boss battles," says Levine, pointing out that where I met up with Daddy differs from where the next guy will meet up with Daddy. "You decide where to fight them in a level. It's not like you go into a room, the camera spins around, the door locks, and you jump on his head six times. You set up the ambush, you hack the security, you >

• "Your first assumption is always wrong," says Irrational's Ken Levine, referring to the delicate act of balancing a game where every player will choose different weapons, loadouts, plasmids, and skills.

• Masquerading freaks fight you as soon as you step foot into Rapture. Hit them with a wrench now—rip off their masks with telekinesis later.

XTRAS

Immerse yourself in Rapture online. Visit GFW08.1UP.com to explore Irrational Studios with Ken Levine on *The 1UP Show*.

take control of other A.I.s—everything's a weapon." And indeed, my encounter with the monster ramped my situational awareness up tenfold. Rapture's no longer just neon lights and olde-tyme propaganda posters.

Mechanically, it's like this: Three Daddy/Sister pairs roam each "level" of Rapture; the little girl is your prime source of Adam in the game, and your main method of powering up your character. Miss a Sister in a zone, and you're free to come back for her later. In the original design, says Levine, the Little Sisters would have more Adam if you let them harvest more bodies before killing them. "We realized that through luck a player could end up being 'I'm a level 20' while another would end up 'I'm a level 40!'"

"There are four Big Daddy types," he adds. "The guy you fought with a drill called the Bouncer; there's a kind with a gun that tosses proximity mines." And two more, apparently, though Levine gets distracted explaining that the Bouncer's current move set—including his ability to charge and stun the player—was inspired by a video trailer Irrational created simply as a sizzle piece. *BioShock* has had the luxury of time, and Levine thinks it's a better game for it.

0 ARCADIA

"Bottom of the ocean, boy-o," says the voice over the handheld-radio static, the accent halfway between Australian professor and American cowboy—your hidden guide through Rapture, tucked away in some undiscovered corner, dispensing plot mechanics and gameplay advice. "All of the oxygen comes from the trees—no trees, no oxygen." In a level dubbed Arcadia, Rapture's megalomaniacal creator has killed the city's only forest—a garden paradise for vacationing citizens. Your job: Use *BioShock*'s invention system (with which you can craft new ammo like electric buckshot and other useful objects out of crap lying around in the rubble) to assemble the pieces of some resurrecting whatzit called the Lazarus Vector to bring the greenery back to life—or suffocate trying.

"We're actually nerdy enough to care about how the city works," says Levine. "So you'll find how the oxygen gets there, how the city's power works—it's powered by these big volcanic vents, and water is boiled and turned into steam—and it all comes into the gameplay."

Here, once the Lazarus Vector's pieces are assembled, a legion of Splicers try to saw through the door with welding torches. You have a minute or so to get your bearings, learn where the water pools and explosive canisters are, hack security bots to switch them to kamikaze mode, lay down proximity mines or elemental air traps, and give yourself a chance against the hell that's about to break loose. But unlike some other FPS games where scripted boogeymen pop out of the same holes every time >

> "WE'RE ACTUALLY NERDY ENOUGH TO CARE ABOUT HOW THE CITY WORKS."
>
> -KEN LEVINE, IRRATIONAL GAMES

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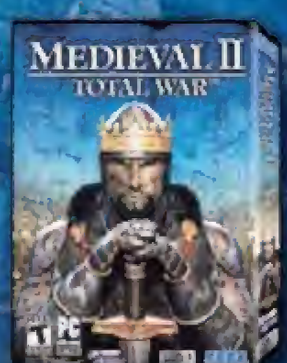

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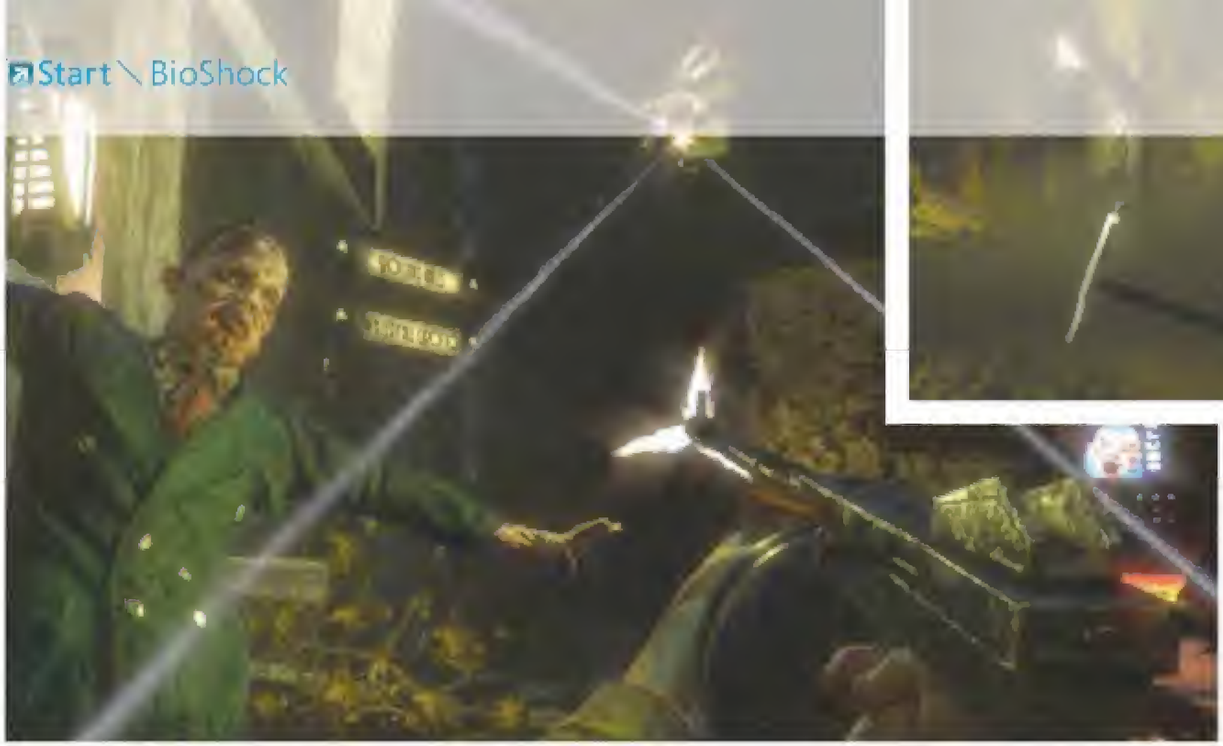

• **"We do a huge amount of focus testing," says Levine, "though, thank god, we didn't do it at the beginning. 'Would you like to play a game that takes place in a semi-objectivist utopia?'"**

• **"There's no simulation without representation," says Levine. "What's the point of simulating something if the player's not gonna understand that it's happening? There really aren't die rolls in *BioShock*. We're all on the surface."**

and failure means more chance for memorization, these scenarios change every time in *BioShock*—and when the game reloads, the Splicers will come in different waves, forms, and numbers.

"We have a very complicated [A.I.-spawning] system," says Levine, pointing out that the Splicer cutting down the door is really just an illusion. "The system surveys the world and sees how dense the population is. There are literally dozens of points where the A.I.s could come in. It sees what kind of Splicers are there; it tracks how well the players are doing and what kind of challenges you can deal with. But I don't like to talk much about it because I don't think it's that exciting for the gamers. I want that to be completely transparent. I don't like to sell it as a feature; I don't *view* it as a feature." The Splicers appear as eerie analogues to yourself—if you see them wielding a power, be it fire, plasma, or enraged insects, you'll find something similar somewhere along the line (ceiling-crawling excluded). Something to strive for, and if you're not careful, become.

ADVENTURES IN THE EMERGENCE TRADE

"There's this great book called *Adventures in the Screen Trade* by William Goldman, the guy who wrote *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*," says Levine, who spent several years as a Paramount screenwriter, "and he has this great quote: 'People want the same, but different....' And it's so easy to drink your own Kool-Aid, and think everyone is as insane as you are about games that are coming out. But most people think about games the same way they think about cookies. I go to the store and say, 'Oh, look, there's a new kind of Oreo.' It's not like I'm looking six months ahead of time and saying, 'Oh, the autumn Oreos are coming out, I can't wait! That's important to remember when presenting a game to the public."

And there you have it: *BioShock*'s a shooter. See? "When you have a game that has more than what you expect, people get a little nervous about what to call it...until afterward. And the goal is to have people say, 'I want these things in a shooter now.... I *expect* these things in a shooter now.' Not everything from *BioShock* will turn out that way, but there will be a number of things that hopefully will, especially environmental interaction. It's one of the things I'm proudest of."

Water pours into a hallway where the tail section of a plane has lodged itself into utopia; I've been so busy electrocuting genetic mutants, I've forgotten about Ayn Rand. "You can't just have the parable if you don't deliver on the guns and the monsters," says Levine. "The visual look of the world, the water pouring in, is a metaphor for what happens to their philosophy. And even if you don't know a thing about that stuff, you'll at least walk away with some feeling about it—but if you don't, ya know, hey...blow stuff up." • **Sean Molloy**

THE PC ENVIRONMENT

"Irrational came from a PC environment," says founder Ken Levine, "and the last thing we're gonna do is make a game that doesn't feel right on the PC." So no need to worry, then, that *BioShock*'s "lead" platform seems to be the Xbox 360. Irrational has a separate team in Australia devoted to parallel PC development: That means DirectX 10 support, widescreen modes, a reworked interface that uses the number keys and scroll wheel to select loadouts, and fully remappable keys. Levine also recognizes that PC versions require a different game balance, so enemies are tuned to be slightly harder to make up for the mouse/keyboard advantage. And Xbox 360–style aim assist?

"No, no, no, no, *no*," says Levine.

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Language
Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org
Games for Windows LIVE

THQ

We quiz THQ, Relic Entertainment, and KAOS Studios on their commitment to PC gaming

Begin Transmission

Publishing *Company of Heroes*, *Supreme Commander*, *Titan Quest*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, and *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War—Dark Crusade* all within the past 12 months, THQ stands among the top producers of PC-exclusive, AAA titles. Via e-mail, we ask THQ's senior vice president of worldwide marketing and KAOS Studios and Relic Entertainment general managers about their increasingly unique commitment to the platform.

INTERVIEW

GFW: What are the PC platform's chief creative and business strengths?

Tarnie Williams, General Manager, Relic Entertainment: For a publisher with a broad portfolio of brands like THQ, the PC platform and its massive install base present an opportunity to target multiple audiences: both hardcore and casual gamers.

We have had a lot of success in recent years with original IP launches targeted at the high-end PC consumer. The rapid advances in PC technology at the top level give us an immense amount of creative freedom when it comes to our game designs. Games like *Company of Heroes* and our *Dawn of War* franchise have resonated very well with PC gaming enthusiasts. Our proprietary Essence engine, featured in *Company of Heroes* and the upcoming *Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts*, can push even the latest multicore DX10-enabled systems to the limit for the most immersive and detailed gaming experience on any platform.

The second part of our PC business strategy is bringing our top licensed brands to gamers playing on more mainstream consumer system specs. These are the systems found in the dens or studies of most households that are shared by all members of the family. Being on the PC gives us the flexibility to reach gamers of all types.

Frank DeLise, General Manager, KAOS Studios: On the high end, the PC still allows us to stretch our legs in areas where other systems may be limiting. It allows us to achieve a higher level of graphic fidelity on cutting-edge systems, as well as some features aimed at the hardcore [audience].

The PC allows publishers to target a broad spectrum of consumers, from the early technology adopters or core gamers to the mainstream gaming consumers purchasing games to play with their kids. Another major business strength of the PC is the ability to reach your customer directly. As a developer, you have much more freedom for distributing your work, employing techniques like data mining to tweak and balance gameplay, and the pricing models are currently more flexible.

Bob Aniello, Senior Vice President of Worldwide Marketing, THQ: When we looked at the competitive landscape, we saw other publishers reducing the scope of their development efforts or relying too heavily on sequels.

AND A

Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts

Supreme Commander

So we saw an opportunity to innovate in traditional PC genres like RTS, FPS, and RPG. These genres are the most attractive for THQ. Obviously, this strategy worked very well [for us] last year.

The power of the PC allows us to experiment with online features and UIs (user interfaces), which you just don't have an opportunity to do on the consoles. Our games pushed the needle in delivering an online experience that was more robust. With the success of these games, we feel we understand the PC gamer a little bit more and look forward to bringing more innovation to this platform. From a business perspective, we know that if we bring innovation to our games, the games will sell.

GFW: How important is the PC to your studio, and how important is THQ's support for the platform to you?

TW: We have built Relic's reputation on the PC. From the days of *Homeworld* to our most recent IP release, *Company of Heroes*, our teams have strived to deliver the ultimate RTS experience by taking full advantage of what the latest in PC technology has to offer. THQ remains very supportive of our creative interests and our continued emphasis on the PC platform, and we look forward to continuing to innovate on PC in the future.

FD: The PC platform is very important to our studio and represents a large portion of our fan base. Our products take specific advantage of the PC differently than the console versions, and have feature sets driven by the hardcore PC players. THQ has also fully supported this in our products.

The PC-gaming scene has a rich history of modding and incredible user-created content. One thing we learned from our modding history [as Trauma Studios, members of KAOS created the wildly popular *Battlefield 1942* mod *Desert Combat*—*Ed.*] is the power of the community. The PC-modding community can offer so much, from additional content to valuable feedback. From day one we designed *Frontlines* with them in mind, [implementing] modding tools and forums early on to help gather feedback on the genre.

GFW: Does Games for Windows Live appeal to you, and why or why not?

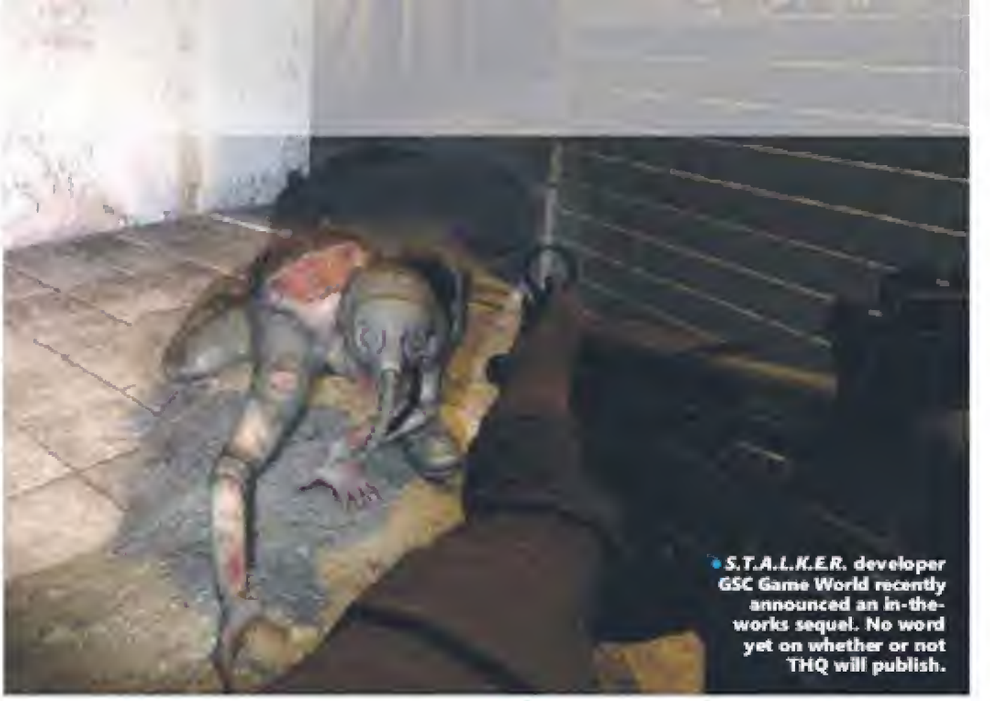
TW: The idea of there being one main place for PC gamers to converge, connect, and conduct commerce is very appealing. Many of the features that Games for Windows Live offers are also very appealing, and the ability to interface with the 360 is intriguing. However, I'm not convinced that >

"FROM DAY ONE WE DESIGNED *FRONTLINES: FUEL OF WAR* WITH [MODMAKERS] IN MIND."

–FRANK DELISE, GENERAL MANAGER, KAOS STUDIOS

requiring the consumer to pay for it is going to work yet. In the PC environment, the historical precedent has been to offer similar services for free, and requiring the consumer to pay just to get in makes the proposition a challenge. I think it will be interesting to see if the consumer feels the added features are enough to support the cost.

FD: Games for Windows Live is very appealing. From a gamer's perspective, it's nice to have one place you can go for your stats and friends, to download other games, and possibly play some games cross-platform. So, of course, this is very appealing to developers as well as to gamers. However, we are closely evaluating the various differences as they evolve between the Silver and Gold levels on the PC, since we want to provide the best possible online experience for all of our fans.



• ***S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*** **developer GSC Game World recently announced an in-the-works sequel. No word yet on whether or not THQ will publish.**

GFW: Interfaces notwithstanding, do PC and consoles differ fundamentally?

TW: Even considering interfaces, all of the systems are just delivery platforms for gaming media—boxes and chips that play software. While there are considerations to take into account when targeting a game for a specific platform, I don't believe they are as large or as vast as they used to be. I can see a future where the lines become so blurry the differences go away.

Look at music, for example. The delivery platform used to matter a lot—turntable, cassette, 8-track, CD, and each platform only had a subset of the available content. Now only the digital representation of the music matters, and there are lots of delivery platforms that can do the job, whether it be a portable MP3 player or a music server wirelessly streaming to a stereo.

Same thing goes for television—who even knows what brand of cable box they have, but they all still play linear video content. Games for Windows Live and its connectivity with the 360 is a step in this direction—we'll see if it can hold on. I think the Web itself might end up being the winning delivery platform in the end, with the end users' specific hardware only adjusting the fidelity of their experience, not their actual access.

FD: For our game *Frontlines: Fuel of War*, yes. While the UI and feature set are identical, the controls are defined differently for the consoles, from autoaim to rumble. On the PC side, the vehicle physics are tuned toward a more hardcore "mouse and keyboard" audience as well as the skill required to use some of the weapons. This [is] combined with deeper stat tracking and graphic features enabled by the latest hardware. Our PC version is tuned more toward hardcore players who will typically spend the most time playing competitively.

GFW: How important to THQ are PC markets outside of North America, especially Europe's?

BA: THQ continues to grow its PC and console share in Europe, and all other major territories outside of North America, each year. International markets will continue to represent a growth opportunity. We're doing more research and game testing in Europe as a result of the sales successes we've seen.

GFW: Has the company considered publishing games designed with the German market in mind—*Gothic 3* or *Anno 1602*, for example—in North America?

BA: *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and *Titan Quest* did especially well for us in Germany. You will see us devote more attention to this PC market.

GFW: *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is a phenomenal game. Will you work with developer GSC Game World in the future?

BA: We haven't announced any plans for future work with GSC.

GFW: How interesting is cross-platform play, either of *Shadowrun*'s sort or of a complementary nature where differences are more than interface deep—for example, PC plays from an RTS point of view while consoles adopt another perspective?

BA: We're continuing to work on ways to bridge the gap between PC and console online play. Social networking and community building [are] an area where we see [an] opportunity to bring PC and console closer together. Our studios are definitely focused on cross-platform functionality.

GFW: What challenges does the PC platform face, and why?

BA: First, the consoles' power and graphics quality are getting closer to [those of] PC games. The technology gap has narrowed on this generation of hardware, so we're seeing more migration over to consoles. But console games have yet to deliver on persistence and robust online communities.

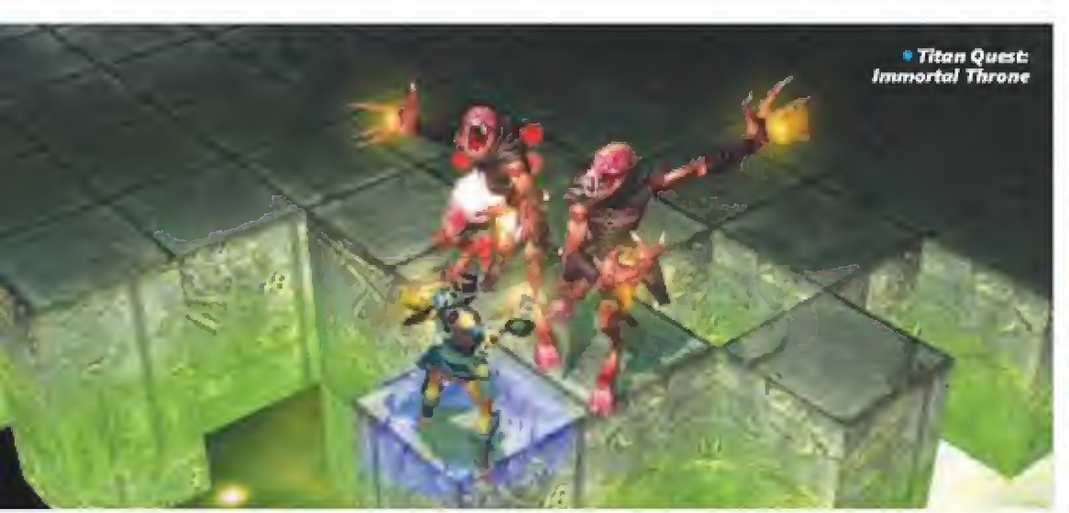
Secondly, the amount of marketing money spent on console games is significantly larger than [that spent on] PC. This makes it difficult for PC games to reach mass-market level.

GFW: How much of an issue is piracy? Epic and id have both claimed that illegal downloading is forcing them to make their shooters multiplatform.

BA: We're always looking for ways to battle piracy. However, I wouldn't say it's played into the decision-making process when it comes to deciding which platforms to develop for. • **Shawn Elliott**

"I CAN SEE A FUTURE WHERE THE LINES BETWEEN [PLATFORMS] BECOME SO BLURRY THE DIFFERENCES GO AWAY."

–TARRINE WILLIAMS, GENERAL MANAGER, RELIC ENTERTAINMENT



• ***Titan Quest: Immortal Throne***

"A Glorious Future For Online Gaming" – PC Zone

"Battlefield Killer" – IGN

"The most rewarding team-based shooter yet" – GameSpot

Enemy Territory Quake Wars

Unrivaled graphics, physics and networking

Objective-based gameplay

Optional offline play against lethal bot A.I.

To learn more about the most anticipated multiplayer game of the year, visit:

www.enemyterritory.com

A Game By id Software

Developed By splash damage

Published By Activision

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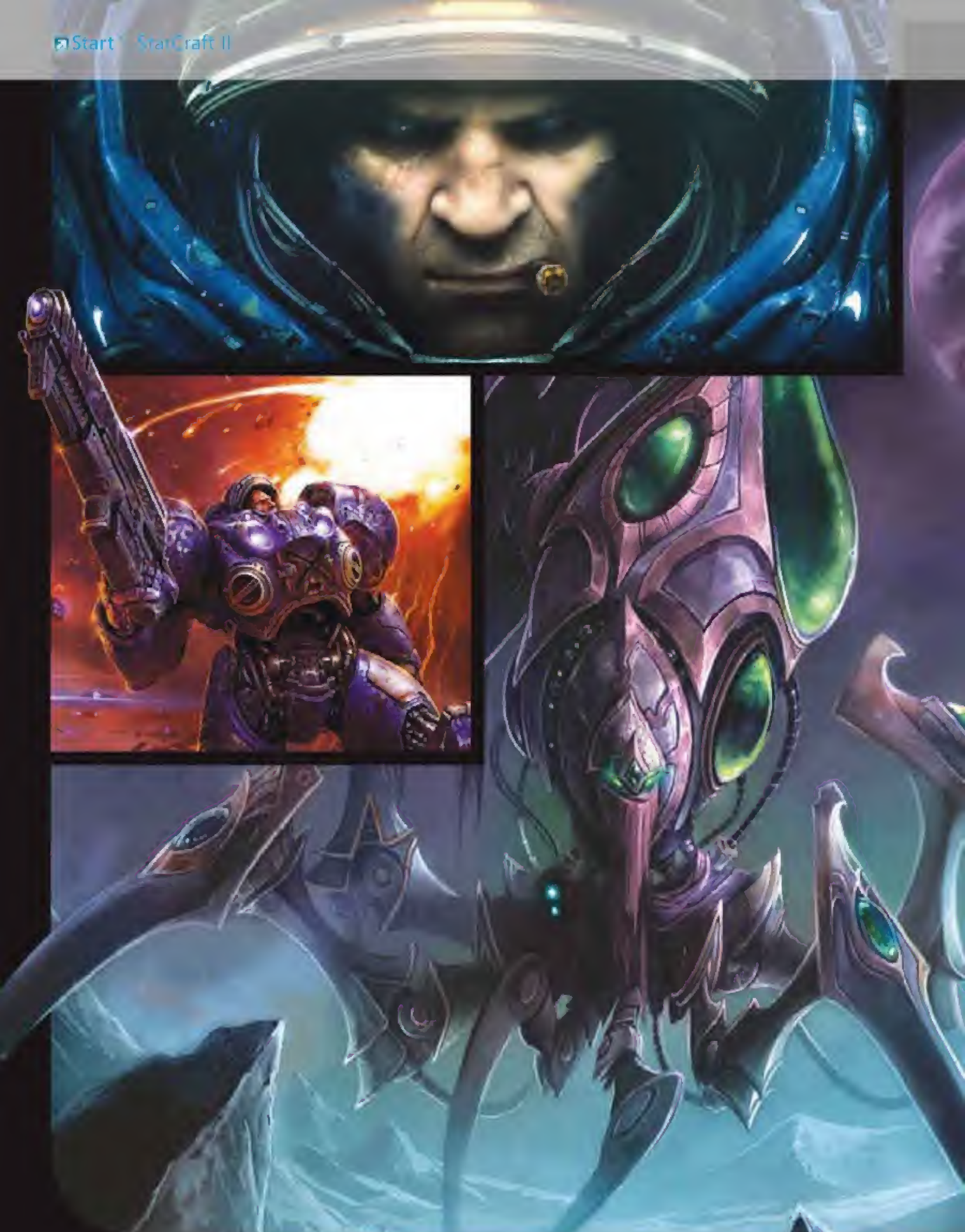
ESRB T (Teen) – Mild Blood, Mild Language, Violence

Game Experience May Change During Online Play



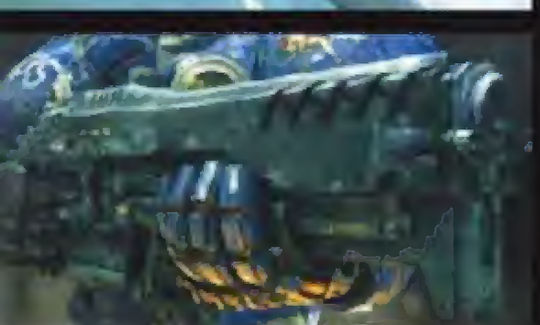
STARCRAFT II

"Hell, it's about time!"

PUBLISHER: Blizzard Entertainment DEVELOPER: Blizzard Entertainment GENRE: Real-Time Strategy RELEASE DATE: When it's done

WHAT WE KNOW...

- Like all Blizzard games, *StarCraft II* is for both PC and Mac. Console-only gamers are SOL.
- All three races return: Terran, Zerg, Protoss—and that's all, folks.
- The graphics are not 2D; *StarCraft II* will use a new 3D engine designed from the ground up, which is customized to support beautiful 3D landscapes as well as massive armies (read: Zerglings) and loads of special effects.
- Battle.net will be revamped to support a wealth of new gameplay features for *StarCraft II*. It's unknown whether this will affect existing servers, such as the servers for *Diablo II*.



PREVIEW

May 19, 2007. Seoul, South Korea—The CG trailer, which you've undoubtedly seen by now, was years in the making: A cigar-chomping Terran marine named Tychus Findlay suits up for duty; auto-factory machinery assembles his heavy metal armor around him. The helmet clamps into place, and we see his heavily etched face up close; he sets his eyes on us and growls out the words, "Hell, it's about time!" Cue nuclear explosion of cheers.

If you'd been there, you'd be forgiven for thinking that sound erupted from a legion of Spartans behind you—but this was 15,000 screaming South Korean schoolkids. *StarCraft II* has been a long time coming, and even though it seemed like a no-brainer for Blizzard to finally craft a sequel to one of the most popular games of all time, the passage of time (nearly 10 years) and success of *World of WarCraft* (would Blizzard only churn out MMOs till the end of time?) had many folks worried this day would never come.

THE RETURN OF THE KING

As big as Blizzard games are in America, *StarCraft* is nothing short of a cultural phenomenon in South Korea, having paved the way for an entire industry (or two, if you count the rapid national assimilation of broadband) of online game development there. Games like *Ragnarok* and *Lineage* probably wouldn't exist if companies weren't suddenly keen to capitalize on the online-gaming craze, and microtransaction-based business models (like that of cutesy 2D side-scrolling MMORPG *MapleStory*) may never have been conceived. So it was almost like the Return of the King when Blizzard president Mike Morhaime climbed up onstage at Seoul's Olympic Gymnastics Arena to pull the wrapping off of *StarCraft II*.

Once the euphoria of the CG trailer wore off, *StarCraft II* lead designer Dustin Browder took the stage to demo the game's new units and abilities, focusing (for now) on the Protoss, *StarCraft*'s mystical Predator-like race, showing off several new units (and only one new unit each for the Terrans and Zerg).

At the unveiling itself and online in the moments afterward, some fans were surprised (and, in most cases, relieved) by how similar *SCII* seemed to the original: The same three races, no *WarCraft III*–style hero units, and an eerily familiar interface. But we can understand why: With all of the new units (some old ones may not even make it back), it'll be enough of a challenge capturing the feel of the original game while increasing the speed, fun, and beauty without having to worry about balancing in a fourth race. (Prior to the announcement, many assumed Blizzard would introduce a new faction spawned from *StarCraft*'s Kerrigan-Zerg or Protoss-Zerg hybridization.) And Blizzard's gotta save something for the expansion.

NUCLEAR LAUNCH DETECTED

It's hard to have the same graphical impact as a *Gears of War* when you're looking at things from an isometric view—and if *StarCraft II*'s visuals don't astound you, maybe it's because Relic's *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War* did a pretty good job of doing "3D *StarCraft*" already. (And, like most Blizzard games, screenshots don't quite do it justice—be sure to watch the videos online at GFW08.1UP.com.) Classic games always lose a little charm when they make the jump from rough 2D sprites to finessed 3D visuals. Still, it'll be great to see the classic *StarCraft* maps re-created using this engine.

As for whether Blizzard will manage to recapture everything that made the original's RTS gameplay so special, we can't make a call yet—Blizzard admits no balancing has been done, and so far, we've only seen the new Protoss units and abilities. (Surprisingly, many fans took the demo's one-sidedness to mean that *only* the Protoss has been upgraded.) It's not enough that the Protoss were arguably the most powerful race in the first *StarCraft* and *Brood War*—now they're even more powerful. The other two races have a lot of catching up to do.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

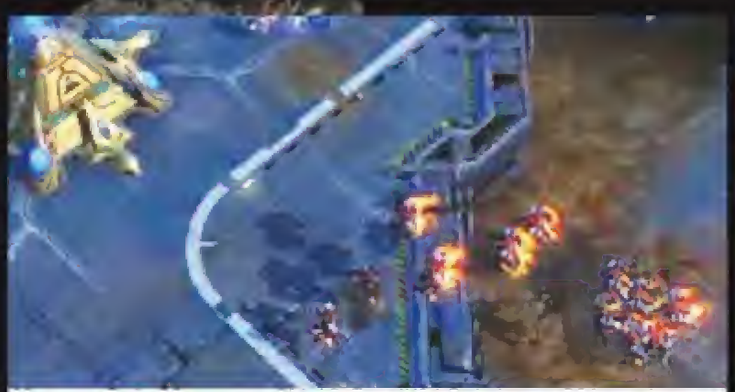
Personally, I'm glad Blizzard didn't introduce hero units here. While you never know what they'll add later (as more info rolls out or in an expansion), the thought of leveling up specific units doesn't appeal to me in the *StarCraft* universe. I'd rather see that in an MMO. But I'm relieved to see this latest *StarCraft* is *not* an MMO, because that would have set a frightening example: Why make a game that people only buy once if you can get them to pay for it 12 times a year? Thankfully, *StarCraft II* is a real-time strategy game with—as far as we know—free online play. **James Mielke**

IT WAS ALMOST LIKE THE RETURN OF THE KING WHEN BLIZZARD PRESIDENT MIKE MORHAIME CLIMBED ONSTAGE.

ANALYZE THIS...

Charging Zealots, leaping Reapers, and time-warping Protoss Motherships. Blizzard's unveiling of *StarCraft II* came with a good 20 minutes of gameplay footage. Being incredible nerds, the *GFW* crew geeked out along with everyone else over all the nuances, new tricks, and in-jokes. Follow along at GFW08.1UP.com.

1:24 TALKING HEADS Every RTS has 'em—but there's something special about these floating character portraits and Blizzard's over-the-top designs.



4:43 LEAPIN' REAPERS 3D terrain keeps foes on the level—but these jetpack-havin' Terran Reapers can scale cliffs and storm bases by surprise.

8:29 COLOSSI These monstrous tripods can step over cliffs, too. *SCII*'s Protoss units seem to stick to the old "fewer units, better units" Protossian philosophy.

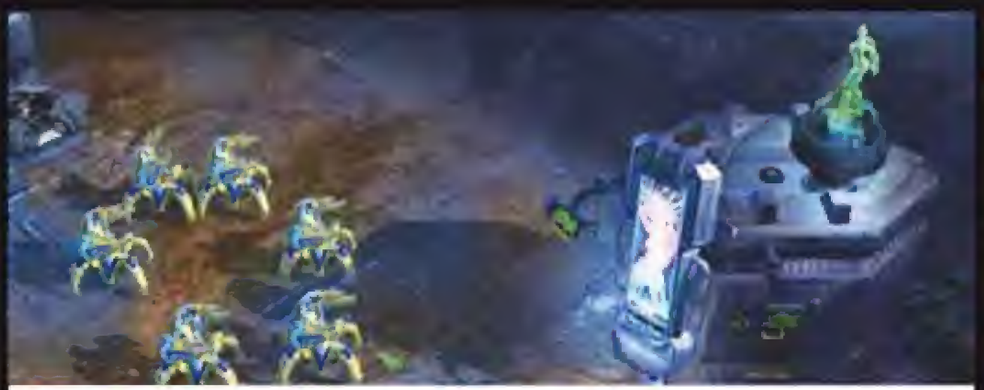
14:47 TIME BOMB *SCII* has no "hero units" per se, but you-can-have-only-one superunits like the Protoss Mothership seem pretty darn close.

20:06 NUCLEAR LAUNCH DETECTED The Terran trump card's back: A well-placed nuke can decide even the messiest battle.

FACE-OFF

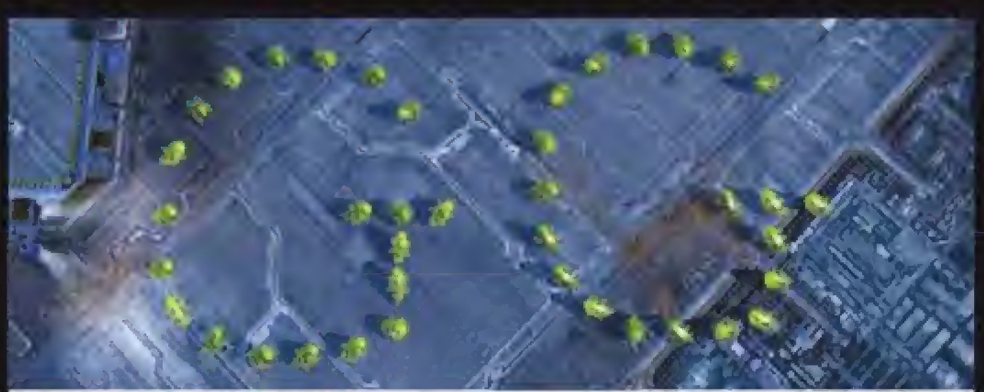
THE OLD The interface from the original *StarCraft* (Protoss version shown here) is a classic. South Korean *SC* champs could navigate this in their sleep...so, would Blizzard dare mess with it, even if it wanted to?

THE NEW From minimap placement to move/stop/attack symbols, *StarCraft II*'s UI doesn't diverge from what made it famous—and while this could very well be a pre-alpha placeholder, we doubt it'll change much.



3:11 **IF YOU CAN'T LAUGH AT YOURSELF** Gotta love Blizzard's sense of humor (and willingness to break the fourth wall). That's a Night Elf doing her /dance emote up there—backpack loaded with Vespene gas tips, no doubt.

12:54 **STRATEGIC DECISIONS** The Warp Ray, which does more damage the longer it attacks an enemy, seems designed to force players to think more about their army makeup, formations, and unit placement.



20:41 **GOOD GAME** Even a trump card can be trumped. When the nukes clear, mutated Zerglings (called Banelings) emerge from the underground to spell out the traditional postmatch pleasantry—whether it was or not.

CIRCLE OF LIFE

StarCraft **is famous for its precise unit balance—and as the *Brood War* expansion proved, even a couple more units can leave designers spinning plates for years to come. So what happens when you hurl even more into the mix? *StarCraft II* uses a complex rock-scissors-paper-dynamite-water balloon-needle-platypus-kitchen sink system:**

Powerful Terran Siege Tanks (top) massacre charging, melee-minded Zealots from their perch on a cliff.

Protoss Immortals (middle), whose energy shields prevent damage from the Siege Tanks' heavy weapons, devastate the rooted vehicles.

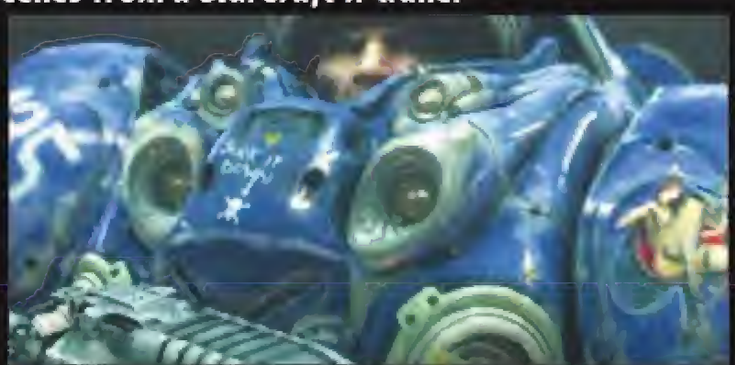
Little Terran Reapers (bottom), however, have wee weapons that completely penetrate the Immortals' shields.

Starting to get the picture?

ZERGLING THEATER

Scenes from a *StarCraft II* trailer

While tragic Zerg-Human hybrid Kerrigan didn't make an appearance in the demo, we think those are her glowing eyes in the trailer.



StarCraft II **poster boy Tychus Findlay is about to make you his bitch. Why else would he have the *Daikatana* tagline ("Suck It Down") scrawled on his armor?**

•The Protoss Mothership's "planet cracker" rains down big bolts of blue death.

WILL WORK FOR V

Ten minutes with *StarCraft II* lead producer Chris Sigaty

BY JAMES MIELKE

INTERVIEW

GFW: So, are marines the new "hard labor" in *StarCraft II*, or is Tychus Findlay, the marine in the CG trailer, just a naughty boy?
Chris Sigaty: We'll get into that when we reveal the story more. Tychus has been a bad boy; that's evident. I can't really go into specifics, but not all marines are created equal.

GFW: Are some units now officially retired? Because some of the new Protoss units seem to make older units, like the Shuttle, somewhat redundant....
CS: At this point in time, that's definitely true across the board. We're experimenting unit by unit across all of the races, and there are definitely a lot of new things, so dynamics are going to change drastically. As an example with the Protoss, the Phase Prism—which is the unit you saw create prism fields where other units could be warped into—is also a Dropship equivalent. So it's both; it's dual-roled. As it stands right now, we plan to keep it that way, but we're not even at internal alpha yet, so we've got a lot of time to see how these things play out.

GFW: So it's possible that some units in every race will find themselves out of a job.
CS: Absolutely, and [some] already have—in all the races—been dropped. It's interesting, even in the microcosm of our own team. It's like, two people get pissed off whenever Unit X gets cut. "I thought no one even liked Unit X." "No, that was one of the most important ones to the game! You ruined it!" I'm exaggerating, but we get that sort of play, back and forth. It's challenging and fun at the same time, to go through the journey of it. And we have a lot more time to continue that exploration, but yeah, units will disappear. And for units that exist that we do keep, we've envisioned some new ideas; the Zealot has a "charge," for example.

GFW: You may have an underground rebellion on your hands from all these "unwanted" units. In terms of the multiplayer, I know you guys are going to come up with a whole bunch of new stuff, but back in the day, you used to have stuff like Blizzard's Map of the Week. Do you think we'll see a return of classic maps, like Big Game Hunters, reinterpreted in your beautiful new game engine?
CS: Yup! I believe we have Big Game Hunters up and running now, we [also] have Lost Temple. So, yes, you'll definitely see them reinvented using the new engine. As far as releasing maps of the week and that sort of stuff.... With *WarCraft III*, we [recently started] tournaments, and now we have PR teams and a lot more community involvement. We're gonna get some great maps out there so that players can continue to have new and fresh experiences.

GFW: One of my favorite things about the first *StarCraft* was playing with the map editor. It was so powerful that I spent more time playing Junior Game Designer than maybe playing the game itself. I put a lot of time into fine-tuning maps I made.
CS: Did you, really? And you didn't move on to *WarCraft III*?

GFW: I had a hard time with that whole jump to 3D. I was stuck on the 2D thing. Do you think

"WE'RE EXPERIMENTING UNIT BY UNIT ACROSS ALL OF THE RACES... DYNAMICS ARE GOING TO CHANGE."

–CHRIS SIGATY LEAD PRODUCER *STARCRAFT II*

Terrans fend off another dreaded Zerg rush against a stunning moonlit background.

It's just about over for this poor Terran base. Quick, it's time to disconnect!

ESPENE GAS

the new map editor will be even more flexible and cool?

CS: Actually, more! And if you had taken the *WarCraft III* step, the *WarCraft III* map editor is crazy. Not only just from the standpoint that now you can lay things out in 3D, but from a trigger standpoint, and the available options for people who were willing to take the time to become that advanced. We've seen some amazing, totally different games, like Defense of the Ancients—I don't know if you've heard of that—but it's a map style that's come about. It's almost like the *Counter-Strike* of *WarCraft*. We intend to move the bar a whole other notch above *WarCraft III*. We're *already* doing that. Another thing we're planning to do is add the art plug-ins at release when we do finally release *StarCraft II*. We did it with *WarCraft III*, but it took a year or two after it was done to get it out there. We'd love to have that stuff out there so modding and those sorts of things are fully supported. The layman, the average user, can go in and just make a map and get it up there. And the really crazy people can go and make totally different games and things using our new modding equipment.

GFW: Is it hard getting 200 Zerglings to run in 3D?

CS: [*Laughs*] You know, that's one of the reasons we revamped the engine and didn't just stick with *WarCraft III*'s. We did a totally new engine from the ground up to support things like that. Two-hundred Zerglings—and that's just one player—so we want to make sure that 4-on-4, man, that gets pretty sick. There's a problem if everyone's getting up to 200 Zerglings each. [*Laughs*]

GFW: Maybe people are setting rules ahead of time.

CS: "Don't go after another player until you have 200!" So that's definitely a challenge. Walking the line of awesome effects and looks versus "Let's get lots of units onscreen"—that's a fine line.

GFW: I know you've been working on this since you finished *WarCraft III*, which makes this the best-kept secret since *Half-Life 2*, but did you ever—in the initial design stages—consider doing a high-res 2D, sprite-driven *StarCraft II*, or was it always set in stone that it'd be 3D because you'd done *WarCraft III* like that?

CS: It was set in stone that it was going to be 3D from the get-go. There are just some things that we can do more easily in 3D. I've seen a lot of original *StarCraft* recently, as we were putting footage together for this announcement—and it looks amazing, especially for its time. But there are probably four frames of animation on the sprites and eight directions of movement. So it looks fantastic for the time, but when you look at a Zealot moving in 3D, you get full, fluid 3D animation, and it's very different. It's very difficult to look at [the new] one, then look at the old one. You quickly forget when you go back to the original *StarCraft*, but there's definitely a difference in going 3D that allows us to accomplish some things that, spritewise, just wouldn't be possible.... From a technological standpoint, it would be difficult to manage.

STARFACTS

FACT: South Korean gamers kick U.S. gamers' asses. We have "pro gamers" with their own mousepads. These guys are on nationally televised shows (on dedicated *StarCraft* channels) that would put an *Iron Chef*/WWE hybrid to shame. It's crazy, sure. But when they pan to the crowds full of screaming women—that's when it becomes a little unnerving.

Sorry, Fatal1ty. Your status ain't s* compared to an entire nation of Hot Korean Girls Who Know Every Nuance of *StarCraft*, who worship your every move, weep at any unexpected defeat, and ignore the fact that you're homely just because they love your Zerg Rush Style.**

GFW: It almost feels more menacing, because the Protoss look so feral when they're running and charging at the marines. The Terran reapers, by the way, look pretty badass. When they come out in the demo, jumping around, they look intimidating. The speed seems to have picked up a bit, too.

CS: Actually, we've got some comments from people online saying the speed looks slow. Korean players have said that. But mind you, they play *StarCraft* >

Zerglings rushing.

on the fastest setting, and this was set to normal speed for the purposes of demonstration. We didn't want to make it crazy. But yeah, we still support fastest play speed and that sort of thing, and it's actually a tad faster at normal speed. But we intend to go up to Korean speed. [*Laughs*]

GFW: Addressing the rumors of the game being an MMO before the days surrounding the announcement: How did you react to that? Do you think *StarCraft* would lend itself to that?
CS: Yeah, I think this is a brilliant universe. Blizzard has done a great job evolving a very interesting universe; I think it would totally lend itself to that. But that was not really a consideration when we set out to make this. We came off of *WarCraft III: The Frozen Throne*, and we sat down with the dev team, found out we were interested and ready to do *StarCraft II* now—and it was always an RTS.... It was great to sit here in the theater and watch people "oooh" and "ahhh" and really be surprised. People knew this was going to happen in Korea, but I was really satisfied to listen and hear their reaction. I thought, "Cool, that rolled out really well."

GFW: It's like throwing a surprise party for 15,000 people.
CS: Yeah, totally! To me, that speaks so highly about the passion that our own internal people at Blizzard have; it's like everybody feels really tied in and strongly protective of it, so that's why we were able to pull that off.

GFW: So you say that you think *StarCraft* could lend itself to an MMO, but if you take a unit like the Ghost, for example, who basically has a couple of key moves, like Lockdown and Nuclear Launch—what do you think the difference would be between a level 1 Ghost and a level 75 Ghost?
CS: You know, I can't even comment on that, really, because we have not explored turning it into an MMO. I'm just saying, from my perspective, that the world could easily do that, but it's not something we're even exploring right now. But if we did, we'd redefine things slightly to make that happen. It wouldn't be that you'd be an RTS unit right out of the gate. But we're not even talking about it. I just think creatively it's a cool world—and it would be cool.

GFW: Every game Blizzard puts out is almost like a hit song by a band. You don't have to hear more than two guitar notes of "Pride (In the Name of Love)" by U2, for example, to know what song it is, and everyone starts going crazy. One of the best moments in the real-time gameplay demo was during the final battle between the Protoss and Terrans, when you hear the line, "Nuclear launch detected." How did it feel to hear the reaction of the crowd when that line came out?
CS: It's amazing. I mean, I kind of sit back and still just go, "Wow, this is crazy." It's crazy to think about it, but it's great to be a part of it. We have a lot of really passionate people who do great things. I don't think anyone ever intends to say, "I can't wait to turn it into a moment where people go..." But to have it turn out to be like [it did]...it's a great experience for anyone to sit there, hear it, and get the chills from the reaction.

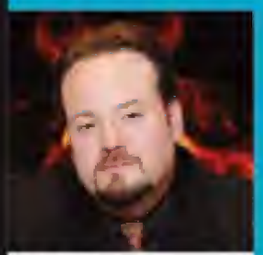
GFW: Well, you knew what was coming in the demo, right?
CS: You know, that's actually a great question—because, interestingly enough, things that weren't expected to be "moments" *were* moments.

GFW: For example...
CS: For example, the Zealot. As soon as the Zealot appeared onscreen, it was like, "Oooh!" But even when we just zoomed in on it—just the fact that it was rendered in 3D or whatever, or just the new look, I was like, "Wow! That's not even a moment." Interestingly enough, the Mothership was something that I thought, just the appearance of it would make the whole [place] go, "Ahhh!" And it wasn't the moment I thought it would be. But then the Stalker blinking made the whole place go, "Whoaaa!"

GFW: You can never say never, but it had been so long since the last *StarCraft* that some people started to wonder, for whatever reason, that there might never be another one. So to hear these familiar sounds, it's like the Return of the King—a homecoming to people.
CS: I definitely understand that, but we're so close to it. We've been sitting on this effectively for two years. Another anecdote: We've been doing internal show-and-tells in a theater. I was freaking out, because I'm Mr. Paranoia, and I said, "What the hell?! We're going to do it in a real theater?!" Internally, you start to get used to it, and it's not that big, shocking moment. We see it daily. But then you put it out there, and it's really rewarding to hear that "ooh"-ing and "ahh"-ing at more points than you were expecting.... It was really cool. ●

STARGAZING

Original *StarCraft* cocreator (and current *Hellgate* raiser) on Blizzard's next big thing



Bill Roper
FLAGSHIP PRESIDENT, *HELLGATE* KEEPER

"I was pleased—and vindicated—when Blizzard announced *StarCraft II*. The original has a special place in my heart, and I have no doubts that the team will do the franchise proud. I think that they'll introduce some great gameplay elements into the *StarCraft* model that focus around 3D, as evidenced by the jump-pack units in the gameplay trailer. I'm also really pleased to see them sticking with the three core races and maintaining the graphic feel of the world. And that shot of Kerrigan in the trailer brought back all kinds of fun memories. I'll be extra interested in seeing if Chris Metzen stays with the storyline we all talked about years and years ago—and that was hinted at in the extra mission in the N64 version of the game."

"WE HAVE NOT EXPLORED TURNING [*STARCRAFT*] INTO AN MMO."

–CHRIS SIGATY LEAD PRODUCER *STARCRAFT II*

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CRYSIS

Gravity gone

PUBLISHER: **EA Games** DEVELOPER: **Crytek** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **Fall**

PREVIEW

Photo-realism moves fast. Sooner or later, another videogame always escalates the visual arms race. But *Crysis*, sci-fi FPS and this year's undisputed superpower, threatens even itself. After rendering the natural world with eye-tickling fidelity (picture emerald islands in the South China Sea where palm fronds flap in the wind and fall apart in the whirlwind of war), the game ought to astound with its third act's alien environment. Only nature's one hell of an act to follow (name a *Star Wars* world that isn't imitating an earthly ecosystem and that's half as striking as any spot on our own planet). So where does this leave developer Crytek's otherworldly designs?

Aliens and H.R. Giger are out, *Predator* and *Starship Troopers* too passé, or so says art director Michael Khaimzon. Tell the artist his exo-suited E.T.s remind you of *The Matrix* and he'll retort, "What, are you f***ing crazy? They look nothing like it. It's like comparing a BMW and a Lamborghini. Yes, they both have wheels." That movie's sentinel A.I., however, might make for an apt analogy after all. In the end, antigravity bots and life-forms adapted to gravity-free living aren't all that unalike.

Inside its skyscraping UFO, *Crysis* upends physics. Fire a chain gun, and the torque shoves you back or into a spiral as casings float off in different directions. Zero G is the game's defiant answer to "been there, done that" design. Players' nanosuits sport thrusters that enable multidirectional movement in a space with neither an up nor down, and if the experience is disorienting, that's because it's supposed to be (nauseated *Descent* haters take note). In the section I shot through, needle-lined walls enclosed corridors. A breeze blew through (OK, lets call it low G), indicating direction in an otherwise Möbius strip–like maze. Intriguing stuff, though slightly less so after earlier levels showcase flash-frozen seas and jungle-trouncing four-legged tanks. Less impressively, one puzzle demanded that I blow out couplings at the bases of glowing cables in order to...open a door. Maximum tech for minimal convenience—*the* alien way, isn't it?

Squidlike in look and movement, the monsters themselves "swim" through an environment of their own making, playing hit-and-run and hide-and-seek. While opportunity to blab about a game before others is often enough for some writers to declare that they've seen the face of God in it, I can't say *Crysis*' unsuited aliens made me "s*** my pants" (as Crytek founder and CEO Cevat Yerli insists I should).

Shawn Elliott

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Game Experience May Change During Online Play

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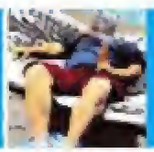
THE FREELOADER PRESENTS

FREE PLAY

The best games that money can't buy

COLUMN



The Freeloader

Think you got the goods? Think your stuff is Freeloader-worthy? E-mail freeloader@ziffdavis.com and let him know!

"What does a smooth-talking, freewheeling, penny-pinching man-about-town do on the average weekend?" you ask? Glomming for cheap deals doesn't come easy. You think people just fork over their goods to the Freeloader? This is serious business—check out my daily regimen.

6 a.m. The early mooch gets the worm, so I wake up and hit the Internet to find some sweet-ass deals—I try www.cheapassgamer.com, then www.craigslist.org. You never know where you'll find that first deal of the day.

8 a.m. Good thing I saved all those playing pieces from the McDonald's Monopoly game. I never win anything big—except some free McGriddles and a "Get Out of the ER Free" card for the inevitable grease-induced heart attack. Nobody ever said being a cheapskate was easy on the digestive tract.

10 a.m. Time for bargain-bin diving at the local EB. I personally hate buying someone else's used bilge. I prefer looking for games that have dropped in price. Here's a tip: If you buy a game three to six months after its release, the price drops like a rock.

11 a.m.–7 p.m. Buy a bottle of Coke, exactly like the one the local multiplex peddles. Then proceed to buy a matinee ticket for a movie and a small bag of popcorn. I've worked out a deal with the ushers where they refill my sack and let me roll into the next theater after my movie wraps. The only downside to a multiplex marathon: Every movie you see that day blends into a nonsensical six-hour epic—or the best ninja-versus-zombie-on-a-deserted-island flick ever.

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM

SEVERE
Game crashes (or doesn't work) in Vista.

ELEVATED
Some basic features don't function.

GUARDED
Minor bugs detected.

LOW
Works like a charm in Windows Vista!

7 p.m.–3 a.m. Time to head home for a night of free games. Wait—every game I found this month works fine in Vista. Is this a dream? At least that'd explain why I'm facedown on the keyboard in pool of drool. Well, back to work! •**The Freeloader**

XTRAS

FREE GAMES!

Every month, our resident cheapskate digs up the best free games he can find. Download 'em from GFW.FileFront.com right now.

FileFront

THE GAME: **Beyond the Red Line** FILE UNDER: **Apollo's Creed**

Few things in this world are worth my hardly earned money. At the top of that list: basic cable. Think about it: a life without *The Daily Show* or *Battlestar Galactica*? While I doubt a Jon Stewart–centric sim is in the works (though that would be legendary), *BSG* is one of those no-brainers. And while we wait for the pros to wake the hell up, we can turn to the modmaking crowd.

Beyond the Red Line is merely a demo of things to come, but the single- and multiplayer slice will instantly bring to mind the glorious battles of *Wing Commanders* past. Translation: It's more arcade than flight sim, and that's fine by me. You can map controls to a flight stick if you have one...or use the trusty keyboard-mouse combo to shoot down a couple "toasters" in this highly polished open-source mod.

Now, I'm gonna quickly sneak in a twofer shout-out here. These coders based *BTRL* on the now open-source *FreeSpace 2* engine. That means you not only get this tribute mod—you can also snag yourself a classic space fighter for free. Trust me, any old retail game that goes freetail™ is worth a try.

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM: LOW

THE GAME: **World of Padman**
FILE UNDER: **Looney Tunes**

I have limited-edition reimagined Universal Monster dolls (wait, I mean action figures!) from Todd McFarlane, Obscure G.I. Joe action figures with snakes for hands, The ultrarare Boba Fett with rocket-firing backpack. So imagine my glee when I found a game that re-created the doll deathmatches from my childhood.

Last month, the *GFW* jerks wrote about *Toybox Heroes* (www.toybox-heroes.com). That, however, is a mod for *Half-Life 2*. What? I'm supposed to pay for *Half-Life 2*? Well, since the *Quake* engine went the way of open source, some inventive coders out of Germany created a triptastical deathmatch game called *World of Padman*.

So, what the heck is a Padman? Damned if I know, but the vibrantly blinding DayGlo colors give this first-person shooter a very cartoony feel—so do the whacked-out locales (John Wayne Gacy's kids' playroom, observed from a bug's-eye view) and weirdo weaponry (death-dealing Super Soakers).

While *Padman* is a fully functional multiplayer game with a grip of maps, soloists can find solace in a teaser on the main menu for mods and (someday) a single-player campaign. But that's all coming later. For now, there's bot support for folks without friends.

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM LOW

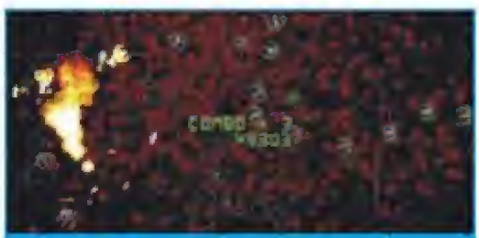
THE GAME: **Between Heaven and Hell**
FILE UNDER: **Out of This World!**

Get to be a long-in-the-tooth gamer like me, and fond memories—flashbacks to simpler days—occasionally club you over the head. The year: 1991. I'm sitting in front of my old computer after installing *Out of This World*. The stark graphics, weird animation, and moody atmosphere blew the mind. Look around for *Another World* online to nab a remixed version for cheap.

What the hell does this have to do with *Between Heaven and Hell*? We get a new free game obviously inspired by that classic title. You're Vince. You've had better days. Run over by a drunk driver, you're in limbo, and your fiancée is hell-bound. It's time to square off against demons, robots, and "an evil lady who throws bombs!" You're running, jumping, and crawling through a neat 2D world.

Better still, the smudgy art style reminds me of that old a-ha music video. All that's missing is some dude with flowing locks whining to "take on me."

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM LOW



THE GAME: **NaaC**
FILE UNDER: **Bloody Good Time**

Honestly, I don't know what the deal is with people: "I need a story with my shooter." "Can a videogame make me cry?" Shaddup already, you big wusses. You know what the problem is? People are forgetting that they occasionally need to have some fun. Yeah, yeah, gaming is an art form. Whatever. Not every movie is an art-house flick. Sometimes the blood needs to flow and the fingers need to twitch. That's why I crave an occasional bloodbath like *NaaC*.

You want a story? Hang on tight: You're a space marine, kidnapped from Earth and trapped in an arena, holding off alien swarms. There's your story. Done. You start in a small room fighting space tequila worms. Then a wall blows away and more monsters join the party. Another wall blows: more monsters. Don't ask—just keep shooting. *NaaC* feels and plays a lot like *Robotron* (it's very score-centered) with *Smash TV*'s weaponry and bloodshed strapped on. The graphics look sharp enough, the WASD/mouse controls will get you through the day, and there's a solid variety of weapons.

Done getting your ass kicked? You can upload your high score to those wacky Intertubes—just like using the Live service, only minus those ridiculous Achievement points. I enjoyed this game so much, I even went back to www.bloodymonkey.com and kicked a PayPal donation to these guys. You might want to do the same.

VISTA ADVISORY SYSTEM LOW

INDIE PICK OF THE MONTH

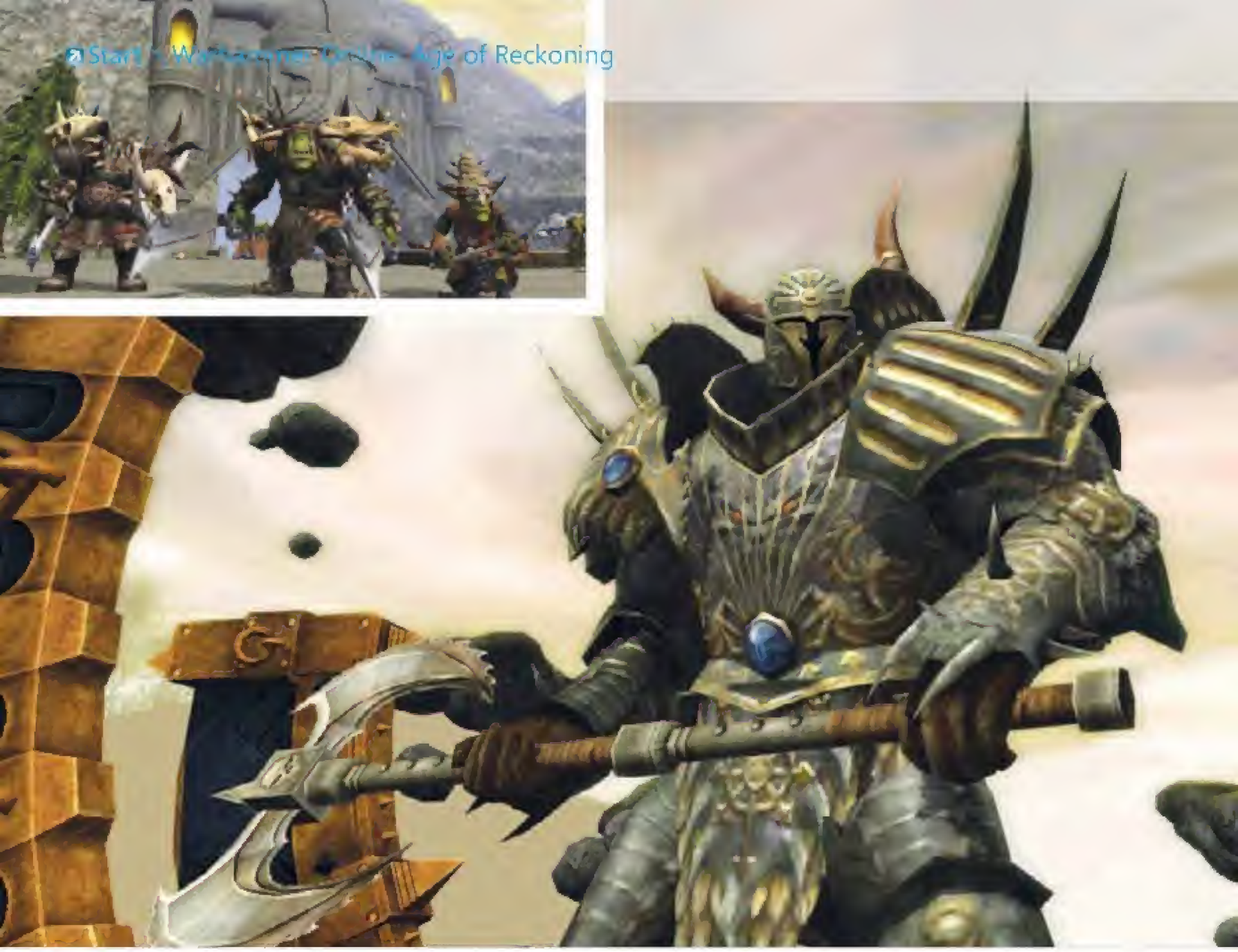
It's not free—but it's close enough!

Just because I'm spotlighting one indie-developed game each month that's actually worth some money, don't think I'm getting soft—I'm still the same penny-pinching mooch you've come to know and loathe. It's just that, every once in a while, it's good to give back to the people making inventive new stuff. Just don't make a habit of it.

This month, I came across a love-it-or-hate-it adventure called *Hard Time*. As in prison. You're the new fish in the yard—the latest resident at a friendly neighborhood correctional facility. Start by creating a character (complete with stats), pick a crime, and then do the time. Now here's the part where it gets tricky: Y'see, you're in a prison, so the scenery isn't going to change all that much. And there are stretches of play where you'll feel like you're really serving out a sentence.

Creator Mat Dickie (www.mdickie.com) put this whole social experiment together by himself and says that the lulls are as intentional as the random encounters...and inspired by shows like *Oz*. I'm not sure if I'm buying that line of bull. But then again, I'm not sweating people trading me for a pack of smokes at lunchtime.

Hard Time is all about the ways you try to carve out a life for yourself behind bars. Whether you're reading books in the library, shooting hoops, or working out in the prison yard, there are different ways to level up your character. The game itself is a little slow. And it's very rough around the edges, but dammit, I still enjoyed myself despite the chunky "Hey, this is the work of one guy—go easy on me!" art style and kinda clumsy controls. But I'm twisted like that. Download a trial version of the game from www.mdickie.com and see for yourself if it's worth the $15 asking price.



"Press 2, press 4, we're ready for war!"

Chosen, Magus, and Zealot: The classes of Chaos queue up to fight the Empire.

WARHAMMER ONLINE: AGE OF RECKONING

Analyzing EA Mythic's battle plan

PUBLISHER: **EA** DEVELOPER: **EA Mythic** GENRE: **MMORPG** RELEASE DATE: **2008**

HANDS-ON

"War is everywhere!" cries the herald from EA Mythic Studios. From the shores of Lothern to the forests of Ostland to the heights of Karak Eight Peaks: It. Is. *Everywhere*. If the Dwarf Hammerer that just ganked your Greenskin Squig Herder doesn't hammer it home, senior designer Josh Drescher spells it out in game terms: "Right from the get-go, you're going to be able to participate in PVP. It's not about killing rats and killing spiders. It's about going out and—if I'm an Orc—killing Dwarves, right from the get-go."

Every-freakin'-where. A curious mantra for an MMORPG selling point—I zone out for Drescher's next few sentences trying to recall a videogame that involves both swords and shields but *not* perpetual conflict (plus or minus three percent). I got nothing.

But in *Warhammer's* recently redesigned Greenskin and Dwarven newbie zones, you can start to see where they're coming from. Spiked fences and bulwarks surround the level 1 settlement, and within a half hour of my spawning into existence, a catapult flings me to the top of a disputed Dwarven dam where mountainfolk work on a warship; off in the Empire starter town, cannons shoot off fireworks and hold off false fronts of milling Chaos warriors. Marketing director Steve Perkins points out a wall just outside the Dwarf starting citadel where, in an upcoming build, Greenskin Orcs will be pouring through the breaches, engaging a sea of Dwarven municipal defenders. Like the Pirates of the Caribbean ride, only with "Waaaaagh!"-ing goblins instead of waxwork Johnny Depps.

Drill down into the Imagineering and mechanics, however, and the Dwarf on top of the dam is really just a reskinned rat, and the purple squig in the tunnels just a euphemism for level 2 spider. Beyond the bulwarks, one of my first quests is to collect fungus—for the war effort, of course. If war is hell, then the damned here sniff out six mushrooms, open up seven barrels, and kill eight disgruntled assassins just like anyone else.

CHICKEN VERSUS EGG

As most MMO message-board posters will quickly point out, the beginning is really just training for the end—and despite aesthetics and early-game mechanics that bear a striking resemblance to a certain 8.5-million-pound gorilla ("Which came first?" question notwithstanding), *Warhammer's* diverging point comes in realm-versus-realm combat. While most *World of WarCraft* endgamers spend their time in five-man dungeons and on PVE raids, *Warhammer* funnels players toward its *Dark Age of Camelot*-spun PVP territorial struggles. And before *WOW* players cry, "But what about battlegrounds and arenas!", here PVP is woven into the fabric rather than embroidered afterward.

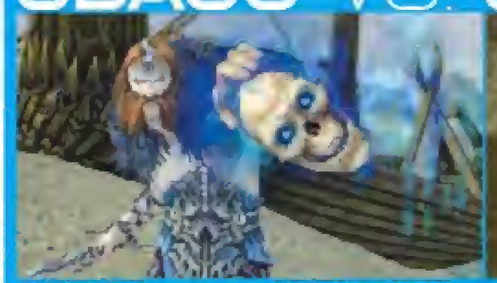
In what Mythic calls Skirmish maps, opposing factions participate in point-driven struggles where each side scores for killing enemies and holding capture points (the interface shows who's got the lighthouse, the barracks, and so on). In the Skirmishes we play, the goal is "first to 500," which usually happens within 10 minutes. Our level-capped characters have about 15 to 20 skills at their disposal—enough so they can all be hotkeyed (crucial for PVP). But enough to keep players from rerolling new characters out of boredom? I'm not so sure.

Specialization cements each of the game's 24 classes (four per faction) to a specific role. Customization comes early and often, but it's partly illusory: While you have a wide range of new spells to choose from the moment you ding level 2, the pool narrows with each progressive level; by level 10, you've chosen all there is to choose, and your Zealot's skill set looks just like your neighbor's (though this cycle repeats till you're 40). Morale (abilities that feed off of a special meter that gradually fills whenever you're in combat) and Tactics (mostly passive bonuses, like increased stamina or spell damage) can be switched up at will to fulfill the moment's need—a *Guild Wars*-y sort of notion, but to a lesser degree.

What's most encouraging about *Warhammer's* method is that, unlike *WOW*, which to this day still nerfs and buffs abilities for distinctly different PVE raid and PVP environments, Mythic can balance its classes almost strictly for PVP play. The danger there: If PVE takes a backseat, the carebear crowd may just wander in, get nostalgic for a land where war covers only 97 percent of the land, and head back home.

• **Sean Molloy**

CLASS VS. CLASS



Twenty-four classes may sound like a lot, especially to the *World of WarCraft*-weaned audience—but they still break down into basic MMO archetypes of tank, healer, and damage-doer, with all the usual DOTs (damage-over-time spells), HOTs (heal-over-time), and other MMO metamechanics doled out in different mixtures and doses.

In balancing opposing factions (Empire versus Chaos, for example), Mythic aims for rough analogues but not exact matches. Here, the Warrior Priest (the Empire's "healer," for lack of a better term, shown on the right) wears heavy mail and earns righteous rage points for hammering away on foes at close range; the more hammering he does, the more healing he can handle. Chaos' complementary healer, the Zealot (left), does better at a distance, marking enemies with Harbingers (visually represented by shadowy ravens) and then siphoning life out into area-effect healing auras.

But specialization could be a weakness—it sounds easy to burn out on the Empire's Bright Wizard class, for example, which wields *only* fire spells. A quick leveling curve to support multiple high-level characters (with minimal burnout) seems key to the game's success...though that's something we can't glean from a day's worth of play.

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL JENNINGS

STATE OF THE UNION: PC SPORTS

EA Sports is the reigning champ, but their games are fat and lazy—the real future of PC sports games may belong to the little guys

TRENDS

Nowadays, athletes argue "it's a business" as often as Kobe Bryant drops 50 or Kerry Wood strains an elbow. Same thing with videogames, but while console sports titles may outsell those on PC by a large margin, diehards still crave sports games on the PC. We look at where PC sports gaming is right now and where it's going.

THE INDUSTRY LEADER

It takes no more than a glance at a store shelf to spot the industry leader in PC sports games. EA Sports dominates shelf space and sales. Fingers point at its hard-charging marketing and clever branding as keys to the company's success, but the games' unrivaled graphics and lack of competition clearly keep EA far ahead of the field. Consider that EA is the only publisher of 3D sports titles for the NFL, NBA, and NHL. *FIFA* is its only PC title with a direct competitor in Konami's *Winning Eleven*.

So is the lack of competition responsible for waves of subpar review scores on recent EA sports titles? Quite possibly. For a few years, reviews have echoed "same as last season" and "little more than a roster update." The games may look great, but according to ratings aggregator Metacritic.com, the scores shake out poorly: *NHL 07* with 72 out of 100, *NBA Live 07* with 61, and *FIFA 07* with 78. The most recent incarnation of the company's most storied franchise, *Madden 07*, averaged a score of 80.

The decline in effort and innovation could hint that EA has quit caring about its PC sports titles. But peddling PC sports games has its upside: no licensing fees to pay to Sony or Microsoft. So, in a sense, it's free money. But that cash flow has stalled as the games' quality has leveled. EA's PC sports sales have slipped significantly in the U.S. in the last year. *NBA Live* dropped from 40,000 to 24,200 sold from 2006 to 2007, *NHL* slid from 35,000 to 23,000, and *Madden*'s sales have plummeted from 164,000 to 96,000.

One inside source at EA told us the decline in the quality of PC sports games is a manpower issue. Instead of shifting staffers away from new-gen-console production (EA's big moneymaker), EA often assigns an up-and-coming producer to take the reins on a PC title. Problem is, the teams are minute—four people instead of 40. So the intent to innovate is there, but the ability to implement isn't. All the work goes into directly porting the PS2 version of the game to PC—and the PS2 (and thus PC) version is a year behind its new-gen counterpart.

But there is hope, according to another inside source at EA, who says EA's new-gen focus will pay dividends for PC players soon enough: The eventual goal is to port directly from the Xbox 360. Right now, though, players would need state-of-the-art PCs to run the high-powered titles—something the mass audience of casual sports gamers doesn't have yet. So it's a waiting game. When affordable high-end PCs come to market, so will high-end PC sports games. Until then, fans have to stomach ports of ancient engines from EA's PC camp.

Y2K IN 2008? IT COULD HAPPEN

In the sports market-share battle, EA's greatest threat isn't even a factor on the PC...yet. 2K Sports, known for some of the most critically lauded console sports titles in recent years, is absent from the PC roster, depriving gamers of desktop versions of *NBA 2K7*, *NHL*

2K7, and the upcoming *All-Pro Football 2K8* (its first pigskin title in three years).

But 2K's top property could very well be its visual masterpiece, *MLB 2K7*—in part because EA doesn't have an MLB license. The opportunity for 2K is a big one, especially with the PC sports market starved for a top-quality 3D baseball game—consider that there hasn't been an MLB sim since *MVP 2005* (which modders are still nipping, tucking, and tweaking).

So, with the market wide open, the league license paid for, and no console licensing fees, what's the holdup in getting *MLB 2K7* or even *MLB 2K8* to PC? A major factor is that 2K Sports games tend to operate with smaller teams than those at EA, and adding another platform (outside of new-gen, last-gen, and handheld games) would likely equal overload. The company is considering it, though, says a source inside 2K, who also told us that because of the strength and creativity of the mod community, the company would likely put out a PC version every two years, instead of annually as on consoles. But the ultimate factor in bringing MLB to the PC—since there's no contractual obligation with Major League Baseball—is that 2K's waiting until it's able to port the game directly from the Xbox 360. As with EA, it's a waiting game.

INDIE INNOVATORS

With the gaming industry's biggest guns pressing the pause button on sports innovation until supercharged PCs are more affordable, the market has been filled with management games that put users in control of minute details.

"The consumer that wants a 3D sport probably also wants a friend sitting in the same room, so that market has gone to the consoles," says Trip Hawkins, CEO of mobile-game maker Digital Chocolate and the mind behind the *High Heat* series of MLB games. "But there's always been a loyal hardcore audience of PC gamers that want thinking games that are turn-based. So that market is alive and well and becoming more diversified."

That diversification has come in many forms. Since there hasn't been a 3D college football game on PCs since EA's *NCAA Football 99*, Grey Dog Software decided to make management sim *Bowl Bound College Football*. To counter *Madden*'s PC complacency, Winter Valley Software released *Maximum Football*, a fully customizable management sim. "You can play an NFL-type league, or re-create the CFL, XFL, USFL, WFL, or Arena ball," Joe Gandolfo of PCFootball.net says. "You can customize the rules to your liking, create uniforms, create players, customize stadiums, and mod [to] your heart's content, since the database is unlocked." Baseball, the PC's most wide-open sports market, appears in a load of sims, led by *Baseball Mogul 2008*, which features animated play-by-play recaps and every season from 1901 to 2007.

But as innovative as these glorified pen-and-paper simulations get, the financial and manpower divide has discouraged a move from management sims to graphically rich 3D games. It hasn't, however, stopped Netamin, the makers of *Ultimate Baseball Online*, the most innovative PC sports game on the market.

"There's been a rebirth of the independent game developer, and a rebirth of people programming in their garage. They don't have the art assets, but they do have the creativity and the ability to make something fun," says Michael Meyers of Michael Meyers PR, which represents *UBO*. *UBO* lets users play a full, 3D, live online baseball game, but the twist is that it's very much like an MMO. Instead of controlling an entire team, users control one player on a team of human-controlled athletes. "With a sports MMO, anything can happen," said Meyers. "The randomness of sports is something you can't quite capture with a one-person game."

Sports fans are generally more resistant than RPG gamers to the idea of an MMO, and, graphically, "*UBO* doesn't hold a candle to what EA does," Meyers admits. But graphics in an MMO serve as a limitation, and the goal is to cut down on lag and have the game run smoothly—a feat with human players logging in from all over the world.

Even though EA's dominance has pushed competitors off store shelves, independent companies are still coming up with ways to compete. Whether they feature a statistic lover's fantasy team, provide the ability to create and trade uniforms, or create a compelling online experience, indie games are capitalizing on today's hottest buzzword, which has worked pretty well for MySpace and YouTube: community. •**Todd Zuniga**

PUBLISHER: **SOE** DEVELOPER: **SOE Seattle** GENRE: **Action-MMO** RELEASE DATE: **2008**

THE AGENCY

SOE's World of SpyCraft

PREVIEW

Hal Milton is done with fantasies and is plain sick of MMOs. "'Massively multiplayer,' 'persistent worlds'—all these terms need to just go away!" he says "If game developers just paid attention, the genre would evolve instead of constantly repeat itself." Milton, by the way, is lead designer for Sony Online Entertainment's persistent online shooter, *The Agency*. And yes, it's an MMO.

Few online games step outside that fantasy-RPG comfort zone. Even fewer—no matter how good—become successful. NCsoft's *Auto Assault*, for example, reviewed well but could never find the audience it deserved.

Undeterred by the odds, Sony is taking a chance in hopes of reaching what it believes is an untapped audience for MMOs. *The Agency*'s primary mission: Lure shooter and action fans in ways that SOE's ambitious FPSMMO *PlanetSide* never could. "We knew *PlanetSide*'s design needed work—namely, it needed PVE combat and smaller, *Counter-Strike*–like skirmishes," says SOE president John Smedley.

SOE Seattle, formed for the task, settled upon a spy-fi setting to attract crowds. "You don't need to learn the 500-year history of some fictional universe," explains Milton. "It's modern-day espionage—you *get it* the second you read the box."

CASIMMO ROYALE

The Agency treads dangerous ground, courting two very different sets of gamers: First, those seeking a single-player FPS campaign (à la *Call of Duty*) need paths to follow. Walk through exotic hub cities, pick a mission, and foil world-domination schemes across the globe. Matt Wilson, the executive producer, promises overarching plots and endgame scenarios; he's just hesitant to reveal too much too soon.

Grabbing the other half of the pack—by injecting solid multiplayer firefights—is the tricky part. "The game world needs to be a lot more than just a lobby," says Wilson. SOE's solution is to merge the story-based missions with multiplayer components. Some missions will have players from competing agencies working together—an uneasy truce against A.I. goon squads. Other times, you might see agents from the opposing faction running a counterintelligence operation to stop you. Or, if you please, straight-up deathmatches.

What's to stop this from turning into *Battlefield 2* with a surcharge? Smedley sidesteps the blast: "We're not saying that there's even going to be a monthly fee. This is all going to require some experimentation before launch, but we don't want players feeling screwed." Smedley's gut instinct points to a virtual metropolis littered with in-game billboards or a velvet rope service that'll have you pay for a premium package with a nominal fee (e.g., $5 per month for clan hosting, TeamSpeak servers, and so on).

"REAL PERSISTENCE"

"If someone tried to sell you their *Counter-Strike* or *BF2* character, you'd laugh them out of the room," says Wilson. "That's why we're creating this notion of real persistence."

The long-term in-game goal is to form your own agency and recruit your own operatives. These collectible "Poké-moles" serve as intelligent offline extensions of your character. A skilled hacker decrypts computers and opens doors remotely while you're in the field. Retrieve blueprints (part of this game's loot system) and your personal Q can build new gear—finally, a game that does the crafting for you! This, if handled well, could be the linchpin that entices people to plunk down money.

There's only one thing left barring *The Agency*'s success—Sony's past. There was more than one glitch in *The Matrix Online*, the relaunch of *Star Wars: Galaxies* nearly caused a rebellion, and *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes*...well...let's just leave it at that. The house that *EverQuest* built lost a little of its resale value in the eyes of gamers. "In terms of quality," admits Smedley, "I accept some people think that *Vanguard* and the changes we've made to [*SWG*] were rushed out the door early." He adds, "That's a fair criticism. We would've liked to [have held] some games back a little longer. However, this is a business, and we have bottom-line goals we've been forced to meet." Smedley goes on to tell how his bosses at Sony Pictures now accept that games require more time to polish. It has to be more than just ironing out bugs, though. Will SOE make the hard calls and design changes to turn a good game great? Can it? Smedley says yes, citing *The Agency* as an example. Though it was originally planned to ship this year, Sony chose to buff the game into 2008.

Maybe things are turning around for SOE quality control. Maybe the world *is* finally ready for an action-MMO. It's just going to take a lot of explaining to the mainstream consumer—and learning from the past—to ensure that history doesn't repeat itself. ● **Darren Gladstone**

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DWARF FORT

Siblings and *Dwarf Fortress* scribes Zach (left) and Tarn Adams (right) play a game of Go.

DWARF FORTRESS' VISUAL SHORTHAND AND ARCANE INPUTS ARE STRAIGHT OUT OF *THE MATRIX*.

PROFILE

The Adams brothers never set out to make the next big thing. In 1987, at the unlikely ages of 8 and 11, Tarn and Zach got bored and decided to start writing games they wanted to play. A prepubescent math geek and an aspiring writer with an ax to grind.

It's 20 years later.

Every night, Tarn and Zach still spend three hours on the phone making stuff up. Zach tells his stories.

Every morning, Tarn fires up his computer. He sits down and asks himself "the question." And it's always the same question: "What would I have to do to make the game tell the story?"

DIG DEEP

Dwarf Fortress is the answer. It's a real-time strategy/simulation made from the same intellectual DNA underneath any Will Wright *SimCity* variant or any traditional RTS. Each game starts with a handful of dwarves seeking fame and fortune as they delve into the heart of a mountain to build, well, a fortress. But two things set *Dwarf Fortress* apart from *SimAnt* or *Age of Empires*: The game is vastly more complex—and it's rendered entirely in ASCII.

RESS

All book, no cover

That Tarn and Zach are completely uninterested in big-ticket gaming is apparent from the moment you fire up *Dwarf Fortress*. There are no convenient icons. You can't click on anything. Instead, there's a grid of characters, in a dizzying array of combinations and colors, and your only interaction is through painfully unintuitive hotkeys. "The ASCII is hard for many people to handle," Tarn admits. But the bottom line is that they just don't care. Pixel shaders and 5.1 sound don't make a game they want to play. "*Oblivion* at its core was like the original *Zelda*. *Zelda* was fun. But I need more now if I'm going to sit down and play a game." Then he launches into the mantra of the Adams brothers: "Things could be so much more interesting!"

More interesting in this case also means more complex. For an experienced player, *Dwarf Fortress*' visual shorthand and arcane inputs are straight out of *The Matrix*.

Johan Helm, a dedicated *Dwarf Fortress* player from Sweden, thinks that's part of the game's appeal. "It [gives] you the details you want," he explains. "If the characters were a third of an inch tall, you would have a problem seeing stuff." That sounds like an oxymoron, but it's not. By abandoning the idea that the graphics need to be pretty, *Dwarf Fortress* crams a tremendous amount of information onto a single ASCII character. Any one of the 2,000 character spaces on the screen can contain one of 256 characters, in one of 16 colors, in one of three states (normal, inverted, blinking). Those characters then animate, flipping between their default state ("Hi! I'm a master blacksmith") and information states ("I'm not feeling well. I'm making a sword"). On a modern PC, the sim ticks—each character moving one space, each process advancing one step—several times a second. There's too much information to be presented in any way other than shorthand.

The shorthand gives the player access to a simulated world with tremendous depth. Like *The Sims*, the game assigns needs, wants, skills, and attributes to each citizen and wraps them in A.I. But where your shiny Electronic Arts sim has a handful of bar graphs to keep track of, each dwarf in *Dwarf Fortress* is governed by hundreds of attributes and influences. And unlike in *The Sims*, you can't even tell a dwarf what to do. All you can do is structure the environment to get that dwarf pointed in the right direction. You can suggest that the blacksmith hold off making a sword and help get the harvest in. He might listen, he might not. It depends. Is he satisfied in his work? Has he been eating and drinking the kinds of food he prefers? Is he in the middle of a career-defining masterpiece? Is his bedroom appointed as befits his status as a master craftsman?

All too soon, you'll find dozens, even hundreds of dwarves swarming through your fortress, and at any time you can peek into their heads and read a bit about what they've been up to.

"Fikod Olinan has been happy lately. She admired a fine door. She complained of the lack of a well. She has been annoyed by flies."

And should you wish to make them happy, you can read their likes and dislikes:

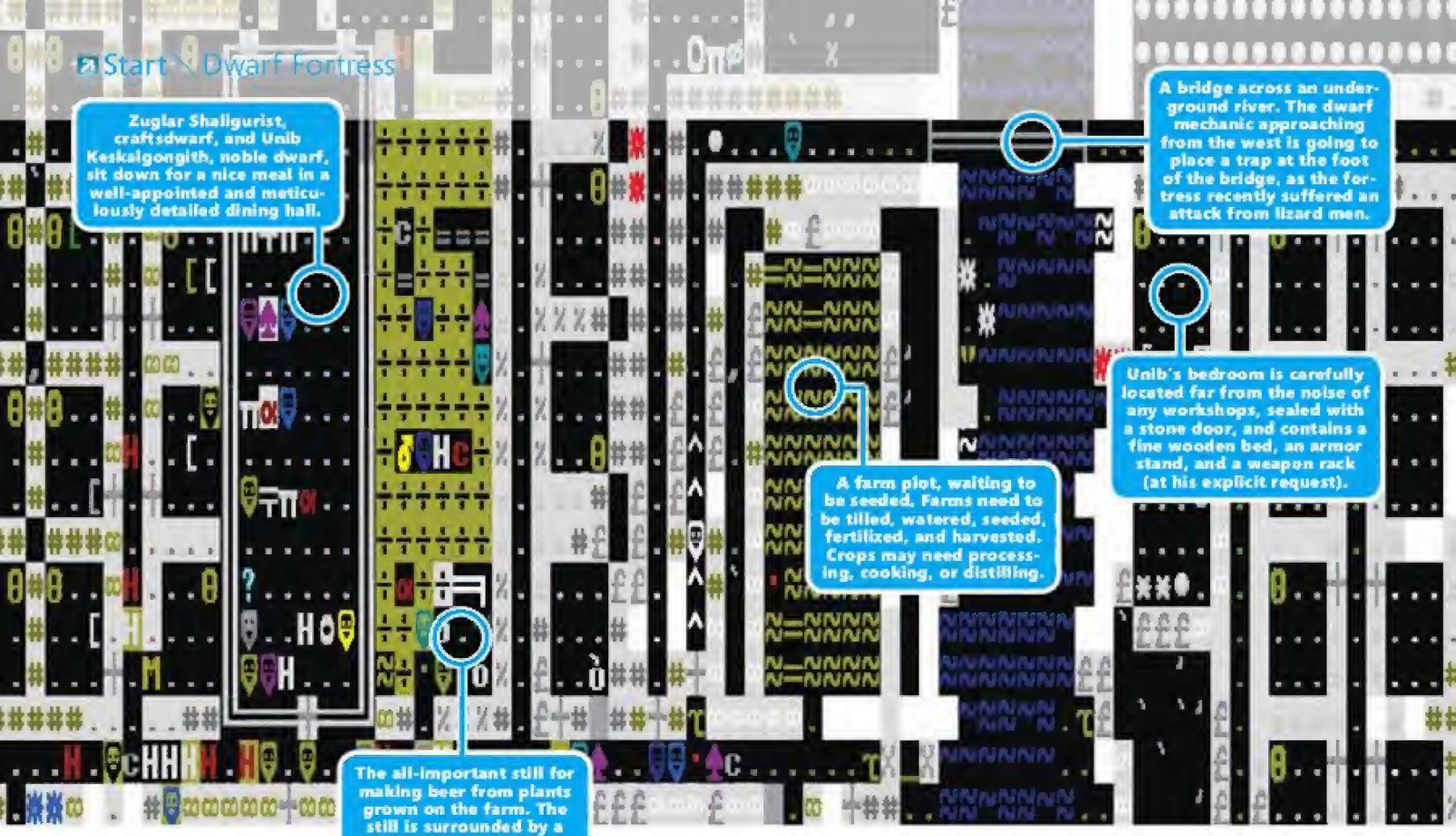
"Fikod Olinan likes moonstone, mangrove, pig tail fabric, the color gray, and cats for their aloofness. She absolutely detests fire snakes. She needs alcohol to get through the working day."

From these bits and pieces—and the startlingly complex A.I. of your ASCII charges—a story emerges. For Tarn and Zach, that story is the whole point.

THE BROTHERS

The division of labor between the two brothers has had two decades to develop. "It's symbiotic, basically," explains Tarn (the designated mouthpiece for the duo). "It's like 'The Adams Brothers,' or something. One of those named brother teams."

And like all good symbiotes, they have almost no overlap in their skill sets. Zach, the big brother, graduated from the University of Washington with >



a degree in ancient history. Tarn, the baby brother, has a PhD in math from Stanford. Zach was a longshoreman until his back went out, so now he's pumping gas. Tarn is a postdoc professor at Texas A&M. Zach writes stories. Tarn writes code. Zach's an introvert. Tarn's that guy on the forums who never shuts up.

Despite the differences, or perhaps because of them, it works. "It's as likely as not that [Zach] came up with the player's guts popping out and dragging behind," Tarn explains. "But he wouldn't be able to tell you exactly how much blood loss it involves or the numbers on the pain and nausea effects."

Even so, Tarn doesn't think of himself as a programmer. "I just don't know enough of the technical details," he insists, despite the hundreds of thousands of lines of code that make up the game. "A lot of what I'm doing is still stuck in the '80s—not just the ASCII, either." He's self-taught, and has no aspirations to learn anything he doesn't absolutely need to make *Dwarf Fortress* better. "I've learned the skills I need to keep the game going fast enough and to make it do the things I want it to do."

Zach, for his part, isn't all that interested in how it works. "If I didn't have a brother who could program...I would have taken it upon myself to fill his shoes," he explains. "But as I do have that brother, I am blessed with the opportunity to make my computer-game dreams a reality." His dream is the game that tells a story. Not an "interactive fiction" story where the player reads an author's patched-together make-your-own-adventure book, but a game where the autonomous actions, feelings, and impressions of the characters evoke a tall tale.

The game's more devoted players have posted hundreds of individual legends, written out long-hand, extracted from the actions played out in game. What those actions are, and the ways in which the game describes them, are the result of Zach's writing a story and extrapolating it into game mechanics. Players, however, discover these possibilities on their own. Because of this, playing *Dwarf Fortress* can become an elaborate Easter egg hunt, where the Easter eggs might dramatically impact gameplay. A typical discovery on the game's forums concerned the unexpected presence of flight mechanics:

Player: "Raising up a long drawbridge while someone is standing on the end opposite the hinge will in fact actually send them catapulting through the air!!!"

Tarn: "The relevant function in the code is called flingify."

The community went on to invent a complex defense system using drawbridges to hurl enemy invaders into lava moats.

The fact that "flingify" is in the game isn't random. It's there because it was required for one of Zach's stories to make sense. At some point, in one of the hundreds of nightly storytelling/brainstorming sessions, someone got thrown off a drawbridge. So this action was captured and coded. "If you see something flying off a bridge, it's because the program tells it to do that," explains Tarn. "Things can't happen by magic."

For the game's hardcore following, this is the whole point of *Dwarf Fortress*. Alex Mooney, a grad student from Ohio, plays every day. During one session, the screen flashed an alert, directing him to his army barracks. "There was a sparring accident," he explains. Combat in *Dwarf Fortress* is often followed by pools of red ASCII blood draining across the floor, prompting the arrival of a cleaning crew and revulsion in passersby. It's hard to miss. "I looked at the injured dwarf and noticed she was unusually depressed," he recalls. So he checked the screen that showed her recent thoughts. "She was terribly upset by her recent miscarriage."

As Zach and Tarn develop new ideas for story mechanics—the ability for dwarves to be flung from bridges, or suffer miscarriages—they add them to a list of "bloats," updated daily and published on www.bay12games.com for player comment. Bloats live alongside "required things," bugs and feature requests that are too obvious to ignore. The current, publicly documented development queue includes over 250 bloats and 350 required things. Every night the routine repeats, the list is updated, and the work continues. Every week, the Adams brothers release a new build.

TURNING PRO

Dwarf Fortress looks like a small game. It will run on even crummy PCs; time will pass as quickly as your machine can handle. It's free, supported only by PayPal donations from appreciative users. Its documentation comes from forums and a small wiki. And yet Tarn has hung up his PhD hood. He's going to make a go of it as a "professional" game designer. Donations have been just good enough that he can quit his day job as a professor and move to Washington to be closer to Zach.

But they're not in it for the money, even if there ever is any. "I just need enough money to pay for food and rent, and I'll be fine," Tarn says. "Well, health insurance would be cool, too." This after thousands of hours of work creating a game that, despite its interface, may be one of the most unique and ambitious simulations ever made. • **Julian Murdoch**

PLAYERS HAVE POSTED HUNDREDS OF INDIVIDUAL LEGENDS EXTRACTED FROM ACTIONS PLAYED OUT IN THE GAME.

RANDOM ACCESS

10 things we're into this month

1 MARATHON

Forget *Halo 2* for Vista. For a taste of Bungie's genius, download the *Marathon* trilogy instead, one of the all-time great FPS series, often wrongly neglected in those dumb "best games of all time" lists because of its Mac roots. The entire trilogy is available *free* at http://source.bungie.org. Despite dated graphics, the gameplay and level design show why fans love it still.

2 PILOT'S-EYE VIEW

It seems silly to strap the TrackClip Pro to a headset you already own, but don't argue with results. NaturalPoint's 3D view-control interfaces drop you in the cockpit, translating head movement into game movement. This makes the TrackIR 4:Pro ideal for scanning *IL-2 Sturmovik: 1946*'s skies or looking down your gun sights in *Armed Assault*.

3 THE LUTE

A notable lack of wizardly, warlocky classes doesn't hurt *The Lord of the Rings Online* nearly as much as we thought it would. Lute-wielding Hobbits can play a mean siren's song, as *LOTRO* is the first MMORPG to pull us away from *WOW* en masse. At least temporarily.

4 MURKYCON

August 2007 ushers in the second not-quite-annual BlizzCon convention in sunny Anaheim, CA. Thousands of gamers say they're going for the camaraderie, the celebration, the communal *joie de vivre*—but really they're just there for the in-game pet stuffed in the goodie bag.

5 PUZZLING MASH-UP

Is it possible to create a videogame mash-up? Don't answer before playing the DS or PSP version of *Puzzle Quest*. It's a *Bejeweled* version of *Fire Emblem*. The turn-based strategy-puzzle-RPG (yes, that is the most succinct description) has already caused us many sleepless nights.

6 AMURRRICAH

Do you like those "what if?"-centric alternate history games? Try watching *The Confederate States of America*, a fake documentary that asks, "What if the South won the Civil War?" The Spike Lee–produced film is an uncomfortably interesting view of a world that could have been.

7 GAMETAP

GameTap's on-demand gaming service is nothing new, but the company recently added a free subscription model for all you cheap bastards out there. Now you can enjoy a regularly rotated roster of 60 games at no cost—aside from stomaching a few ads. Fair trade? You decide.

8 D.O.A.

Yeah, it's a movie based on a videogame, which means it's probably far from what anyone might rationally define as "good." But as long as you're watching *Dead or Alive* for the same reasons that you play the games (in plain English: for the boobs), you can at least call it "entertaining."

9 MARIO KART

It's-a me! A grown man playing with a remote-controlled Mario Kart! For $50, www.thinkgeek.com is willing to hand over the wheel of this 12-inch long R/C racer that'll speed through the house. Game sounds come from a mock GameCube controller. Heat-seeking turtle shells and banana peels not included.

10 SETTLERS OF CATAN

Board gaming nerds already know the draw of *Catan*. Now it's on Xbox Live Arcade. Imagine an in-depth board game—somewhere between *Risk* and *Axis & Allies*—that you can pick up in minutes. Then spend days strategizing about the best way to colonize a newly discovered island before anyone else. To remove any doubt of *Catan*'s move to gamepad, the big huge brains at Big Huge Games developed this version.

PIPELINE

Save some cash for these upcoming games

JUNE 2007	PUBLISHER
Call of Juarez	Ubisoft
DIRT	Codemasters
Driver: Parallel Lines	Atari
Enemy Territory: Quake Wars	Activision
Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2	Ubisoft
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix	Electronic Arts
Lost Planet: Extreme Condition	Capcom
Overlord	Codemasters
Seven Kingdoms: Conquest	Enlight Software
The Sims: Pet Stories	Electronic Arts
Storm of War: Battle of Britain	Ubisoft
Sword of the New World: Granado Espada	K2 Network
Tomb Raider: Anniversary	Eidos Interactive
Two Worlds	TopWare Interactive

JULY/AUGUST 2007	PUBLISHER
BioShock	2K Games
Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising	SOE
Guild Wars: Eye of the North	NCsoft
Madden NFL 08	Electronic Arts
Medal of Honor: Airborne	Electronic Arts
Stranglehold	Midway
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08	Electronic Arts

SEPTEMBER 2007	PUBLISHER
BlackSite: Area 51	Midway
Crysis	Electronic Arts
CSI: Hard Evidence	Ubisoft
Experiment 112	DreamCatcher
Field Ops	Freeze Interactive
Frontlines: Fuel of War	THQ
Hellgate: London	Namco Bandai/EA
Kane & Lynch: Dead Men	Eidos Interactive
Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer	Atari
The Settlers: Rise of an Empire	Ubisoft
Unreal Tournament 3	Midway
The Witcher	Atari
World in Conflict	Vivendi Games

SUMMER/FALL 2007	PUBLISHER
Age of Pirates: Captain Blood	Playlogic
Dungeon Runners	NCsoft
Haze	Ubisoft
Huxley	Webzen
Interstellar Marines	Zero Point Software
Savage 2: A Tortured Soul	S2 Games
Tabula Rasa	NCsoft
TimeShift	Vivendi Games
WarBirds 2006	IEntertainment

WORLD EXCLUSIVE

HIGH SOCIETY

EA Games and Tilted Mill set out to build a better SimCity

COVER FEATURE

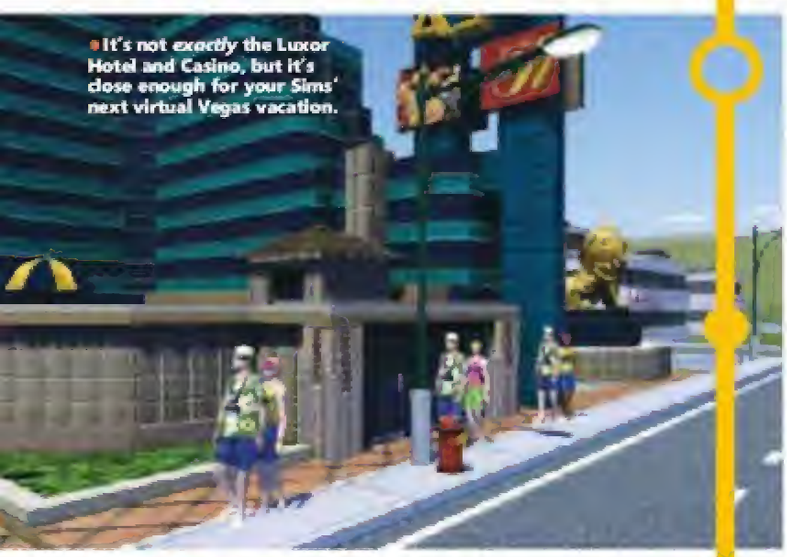
"*SimCity* kind of worked itself into a corner. We were still appealing to this core *SimCity* group. It had gotten a little complicated for people who had never played *SimCity*. We want to take it back to its roots where somebody who had never heard of *SimCity* can pick it up and enjoy playing it without thinking it was really, really hard."

—Will Wright, chief designer, Maxis Software
***Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, May 2004**

We couldn't have said it better.

SimCity, the city-building simulation franchise that made game designer Will Wright a legend, isn't something that most would label "user-friendly" these days. Sure, the original *SimCity* presented armchair architects with a fairly simple, low-maintenance toolset with which to build their dream cities. But ever since 1993's *SimCity 2000*, successive entries grew exponentially more complex, thanks to maddeningly micromanagement-intensive features like manual emergency-response dispatch, funding for individual buildings, and—worst of all—those dreaded underground water pipes. For all but a niche group of *Sim* savants, the perennial city-sim series became nigh impenetrable by the time *SimCity 4* rolled around in mid-2003. >

BY RYAN SCOTT



It's not *exactly* the Luxor Hotel and Casino, but it's close enough for your Sims' next virtual Vegas vacation.

Judging from Wright's prophetic quote, publisher EA's taken *SimCity*'s troubles to heart. The next installment, *SimCity: Societies* (the current working title), is a thorough reexamination of what it means to construct and manage a virtual metropolis. Ironically, neither Wright nor his studio are involved with the game (they're hard at work on *Spore*); instead, EA's tapped Tilted Mill Entertainment—the developer behind *Immortal Cities: Children of the Nile* and, most recently, *Caesar IV*—to build this *SimCity* from the ground up.

With Maxis fully out of the loop, the decision to go with Tilted Mill for *Societies*' development was a no-brainer, according to Rod Humble, the head of EA's *Sims* division. "Placing [the game] with an experienced, different developer made a lot of sense," says Humble. "I'd met the Tilted Mill guys on quite a few [occasions], and it was always like, 'Hey, we should do something.' And, once we got [to *SimCity: Societies*], we showed [them] our concept, and they said, 'Hey, this is great—but let's change it here, here, and here, and how about this and this?' and we sort of got a fire hose of creativity from them. It was a great fit."

SOCIAL ENGINEERING

Fans of Tilted Mill's previous efforts—especially *Immortal Cities*—will note the added emphasis those games place on the cities' denizens, in addition to the cities themselves. As its title shows, *Societies* is another step in this direction: Where previous *SimCity* games ultimately revolved around the big-picture goal of stepping into the mayor's shoes and maintaining a thriving, prototypical megalopolis, *Societies* places equal importance on the Sims themselves—a decision with obvious mass-appeal potential, given *The Sims* series' widespread popularity.

Societies' core design mechanic involves a half-dozen "social energies" that influence your city's overall feel. These six values—Wealth, Industry, Knowledge, Devotion, Creativity, and Obedience—accrue based on what types of decisions you make and what sorts of buildings you place...and your Sims' lifestyles adjust accordingly. "The buildings are what make the people do what they do," says senior designer Jeff Fiske. "The people are a reflection of the buildings that you've placed."

Your city's overall "profile" (appearance, music, and flavor text) changes to reflect which social energies you choose to focus on; for example, >

The interface is pretty much what you'd expect...but now it's got lots of big, colorful icons to tell you how much money you've got left to waste, how you're doing with the various social energies, and how many Sims call your city home.

Break-dancers are one of many sources of happiness and entertainment for your tough-to-please Sim-citizens.

If you've ever wanted to build a haunted amusement park, you finally get your wish. Scooby Dooby Doo!

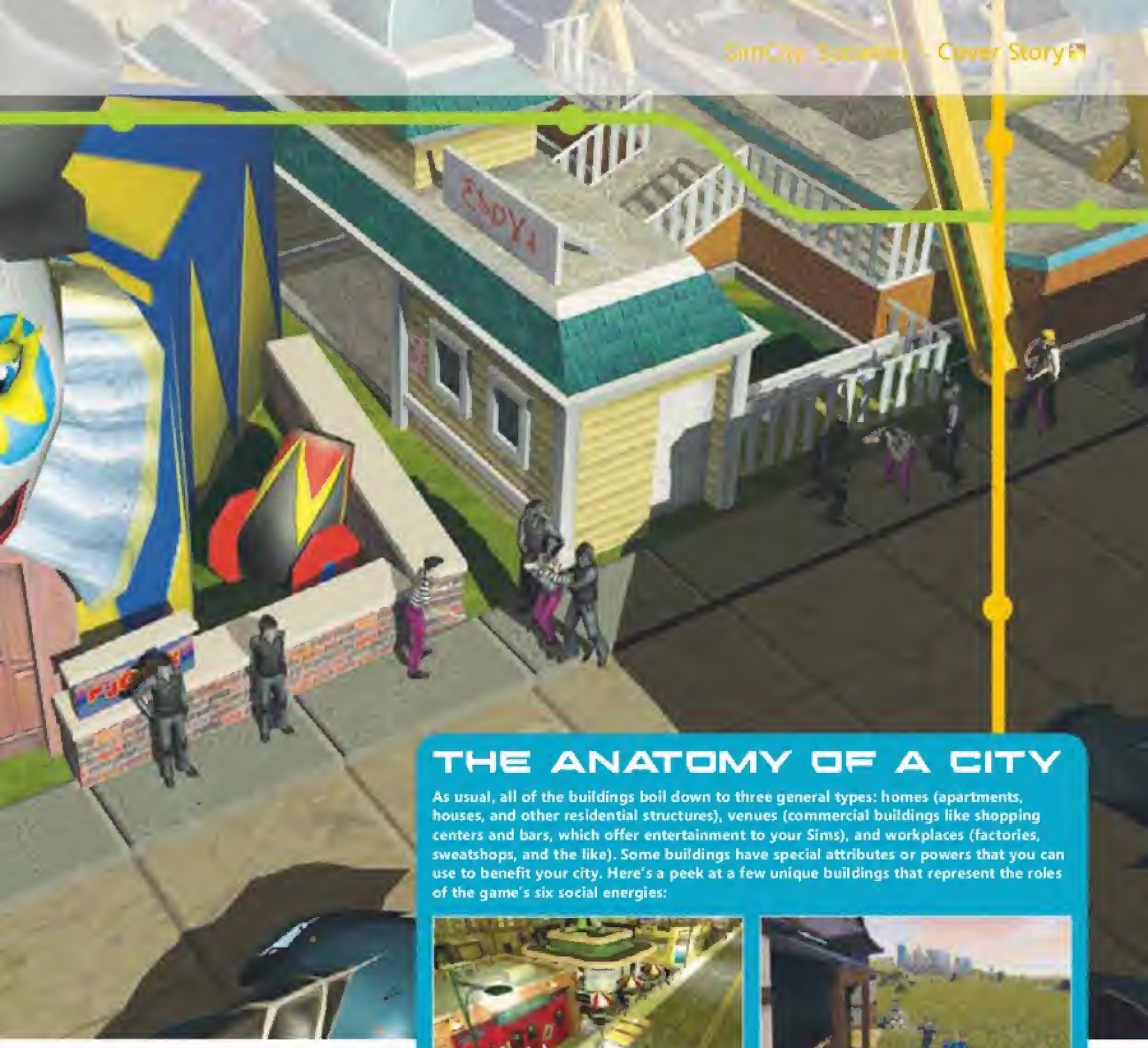
Obedience-rich cities enjoy access to highly intolerant law enforcement officials, perfect for rounding up unruly mimes.

a city that favors Wealth or Industry might look like a New York–style metro area or a smog-choked manufacturing giant lined with factories and slums. A Devotion-centric culture takes on the qualities of a peaceful Amish or Buddhist community, an Obedience-based society brings dystopian visions of George Orwell's *1984* to virtual life, and a city with a high Creativity level might wind up looking like a virtual *Candy Land* complete with yellow brick roads and gingerbread houses. *Societies* includes over a dozen such profiles in all (based on various combinations of social energies), making for a collection of dramatically different options that look a heck of a lot more interesting than the usual traffic-choked skyscraper farms to which *SimCity* fans are accustomed.

Lest you think that the differences are all cosmetic, think again: The values you pursue heavily influence your Sims' lifestyles, happiness, and overall community structure, effectively making for lots of unique strategic angles. Devotion-based societies might unlock buildings that cost no simoleans (*SimCity*'s currency)—but rather, manpower—to build (see "The Anatomy of a City," pg. 63, for a rundown of a few different building types). Such a culture might not be very technologically advanced, though, which leads to the use of volunteer fire brigades and spiritual healers. Conversely, an Orwellian city is constructed chiefly around the concept of conditioning your Sims via handy gulags and harsh, unsympathetic secret police squads; in such a community, it's better for your Sims to be merely content—but not quite *happy*—with their lives (you can tell the difference with the click of a button, thanks to a color-coded system).

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

"We are certainly not out to fix something that's broken," says lead designer (and Tilted Mill cofounder) Chris Beatrice, speaking on the shift in the series' focus. "Quite the opposite, in fact. The [*SimCity*] series has always been immensely popular and well made, and has achieved the height of what a realistic, modern city simulation can be. Of course, after several iterations [over] 18 years, there's not much scope to simply improve upon the existing paradigm. That means we need to distill the essence of what *SimCity* is: a creative, free-form experience about making the city you want to make, and watching it come to life, without a >



"WE ARE CERTAINLY NOT OUT TO FIX SOMETHING THAT'S BROKEN."

CHRIS BEATRICE
LEAD DESIGNER
TILTED MILL ENTERTAINMENT

THE ANATOMY OF A CITY

As usual, all of the buildings boil down to three general types: homes (apartments, houses, and other residential structures), venues (commercial buildings like shopping centers and bars, which offer entertainment to your Sims), and workplaces (factories, sweatshops, and the like). Some buildings have special attributes or powers that you can use to benefit your city. Here's a peek at a few unique buildings that represent the roles of the game's six social energies:

Dive Bar (Industry/Venue):
A popular entertainment spot that generates large amounts of happiness. However, drunk Sims have to walk home—so make sure you build your dive bars near residential areas.

Wall Street (Wealth/Workplace):
Allows you to play the stock market and gamble your hard-earned simoleans for the chance to earn even more.

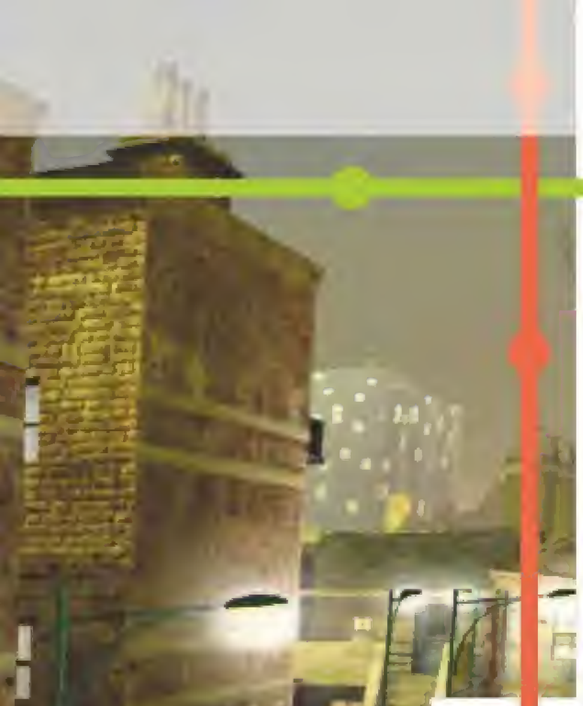
Skyrise Apartment (Knowledge/Home):
A high-rise that houses large numbers of Sims. Residents receive a bonus to their happiness.

Dojo (Devotion/Venue):
The monks who train here can perform happiness-generating martial-arts demonstrations for onlookers. The occasional crime-fighting Master spawns here as well.

Spirit Squad Room (Creative/Workplace):
This building dispatches cheerleaders, who scour the city for unhappy Sims to cheer up.

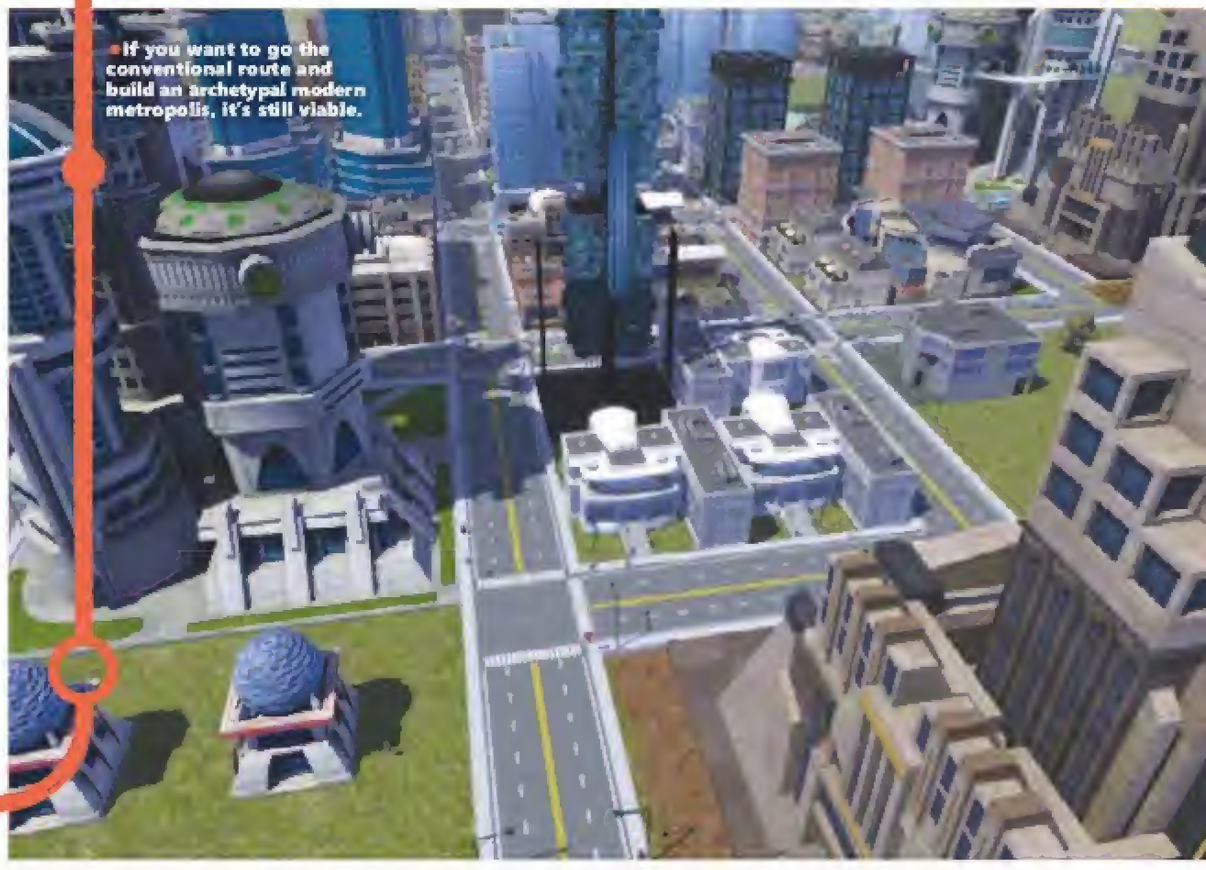
Ministry of Thought (Obedience/Workplace):
A center for instilling obedience in your Sims. The Ministry also sends forth Men in Black, who round up rebellious types (artists, mimes, and the like).

Take the industrial land baron route, and your city's appearance shifts to reflect the squalor in which your subjects are forced to live. Geez, why don't you go kick some puppies, too?



DO-IT-YOURSELF

Another element set to return later on down the road (if not out of the box): modification tools. Player-created buildings and scenarios gave previous *SimCity* games considerable replay value (even beyond their near-limitless default potential), and these—along with the capacity to modify building behaviors, and theoretically construct entirely new city profiles—have a home here. As for full-blown online functionality: "We're looking at some of those things with EA," senior designer Jeff Fiske teases, "but right now, we're not disclosing our plans on what we're going to be doing."



If you want to go the conventional route and build an archetypal modern metropolis, it's still viable.

huge pressure to 'win.' At the same time, we need to make this experience immediately accessible to people who have never played this type of game before. This game is not about struggling to simply make a city function, but about deciding what you are going to do with your creation, where you are going to take it, or just exploring the possibilities and seeing what happens."

To Beatrice's last point, *Societies*' sandbox gameplay rewards players for experimentation, providing ample encouragement to sample all the various city profiles. "The game's going to begin with about 15 percent of the buildings [unlocked]," Fiske explains. "As players doodle with that initial building set, we'll walk them through some goals and allow them to learn how to use the homes, workplaces, and venues to create a functioning society." Hitting various milestones in your city's progress permanently unlocks additional buildings and bonuses; for instance, achieving a healthy (if you can call it that) dystopian society imparts the "Master of Puppets" medal, which unlocks several Obedience-oriented buildings and starts you off with 15 free Obedience points anytime you start a new city. "It tends to make it easier to build the same [types of] cities again," Fiske grins.

CITY STATE

Tilted Mill's casual approach to *Societies* also includes the elimination of complex legacy systems like advisers and infrastructures. Those hellish water pipes and power grids are (finally) gone forever (roads are the only infrastructure you need to worry about), and you no longer have an army of animated heads breathing down your neck about skyrocketing crime or pollution rates. *Societies* conveys this type of statistical information via its goal text and general overall atmosphere. Instead of being told what's happening in your city, you can see it with your own eyes. According to Fiske, "What you see in the world is communicative of the state of your city. People >

THOSE HELLISH WATER PIPES AND POWER GRIDS ARE (FINALLY) GONE FOREVER

Sick and tired of your population's bothersome free will? Send the Men In Black after 'em.

"What happens to us in the future? What, do we become a**holes or something?"

Everything's possible, from eclectic cultural melting pots (above) to bizarre societies where present-day automobiles mix with futuristic stop sign technology (right).

NO MAN'S LAND

Destructive types can celebrate the return of one of *SimCity*'s hallmark features: citywide disasters. While we didn't glimpse much beyond fires (pictured above) and earthquakes, we're told to expect a full range of crises. Here's hoping for more rampaging monsters!

actually have to get from their homes, to their workplaces, and to enough venues to [stay] content enough to show up to work the next day. Or, if the Sims continue to be in a bad mood, they'll begin to skip work...then after that, they'll act out and actually go vandalize something to blow off some steam. If they keep on repeating the cycle, you're basically going to have a city where everything's getting closed down [because] it's not functioning."

On top of the constant input your city offers, a revamped interface helps you to carry out your civic duties. Dropping new structures into your city's faster and easier, thanks to an eyedropper tool (think Photoshop) that lets you copy and paste already existing building types. The handy news ticker provides another quick way to monitor urgent citywide issues. And—as hardcore *SimCity* fans should no doubt appreciate—you can view your city through an expanded number of statistical overlays, which show everything from crime rates to land values to individual buildings' social energy production (and consumption). Both seasoned and rookie city-builders should have an easier time getting things done with what appears to be a very streamlined toolset.

This *SimCity* is still early in its planning stages, but if the blueprint we saw is any indication, *Societies* will be one heck of a welcome renovation project. "When it comes down to doing a sequel, you're always walking a tightrope," Beatrice muses. "You certainly want to deliver what the audience felt was great about the first one, but you need to offer something new at the same time." He's got our vote.

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Reviews

Opinions you can trust

The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar

THIS MONTH IN REVIEWS...

Right about now, you might be looking at that rogues' gallery on the opposite page and wondering, "Who are all these geeks?" Well, we've decided to (somewhat) literally take a page from sister magazine *EGM* and celebrate our own PC-lovin' Review Crew, composed of *GFW* editors, a few helping hands from 1UP.com, and a pool of the industry's best freelance writers.

Our goal in expanding the Review Crew concept to *GFW* (and across the 1UP Network in general) is to form a better connection between those of us who write the reviews and those of you who read them. The names and faces will rotate regularly to reflect who's pitching in for each issue, so you can learn more about them, how well their tastes mesh with yours, and even harass them on their 1UP.com blogs when they don't give your favorite game an 11 out of 10.

OK, hopefully not *too* much of that last part.... **Ryan Scott, Reviews Editor**

INSIDE

WTF

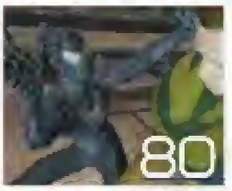
The Lord of the Rings Online

It only took nine years, but it's finally here.

ROFL

Sam & Max: Episode 6—Bright Side of the Moon

The season finale!



OMG

Spider-Man 3

Can it make up for the atrocity that was *Spider-Man 2*?

SCORE KEY

GFW uses a 10-point scoring scale to inform you, at a glance, whether or not a game is worth your hard-earned money. We strictly enforce a score of 5 as the median, meaning that any game receiving a score of 6+ is certainly worth playing—at least to some extent. Here's how the numbers break down:

Editors' Choice award

Any game scoring a 9 or higher receives a *GFW* Editors' Choice award, signifying the very best in PC gaming.

9-10: Excellent
Genre benchmarks—universally recommended.

7-8.5: Good
Enjoyable throughout, with minor flaws.

5-6.5: Average
Status quo. Only genre enthusiasts need apply.

3-4.5: Bad
Significant bugs or fundamental design issues.

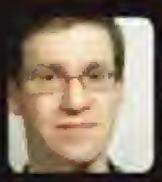
0-2.5: Terrible
Never should have been made.

MEET THE CREW

The Review Crew is the 1UP Network's ensemble cast of game critics, composed of writers from all of our publications, both online and in print. We believe that games are more than the sum of their parts, so we tackle them subjectively, as *experiences*.

RYAN SCOTT
REVIEWS EDITOR
Resident ubergeek Ryan Scott splits his free time between comics, rampant *Lost* speculation, and way too many MMORPGs.
Current Faves: *LOTR Online, City of Villains, Sam & Max: Season 1*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

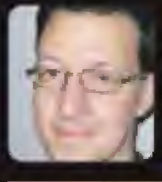
SCOTT SHARKEY
STAFF WRITER, 1UP.COM
Scott was raised by wild woodland creatures until the tender age of five, when they all died. His upbringing was completed by a Nintendo.
Current Faves: *LOTR Online*
1UP.com Blog: solidsharkey.1UP.com



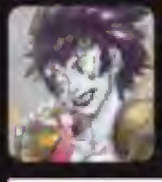
CHARLES ARDAI
STAFF REVIEWER
Award-winning author Charles Ardai started reviewing games in 1983. He's also the founder and editor of publisher Hard Case Crime (www.hardcasecrime.com).
Current Faves: *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*
1UP.com Blog: charles_ardai.1UP.com

JEFF LACKEY
STAFF REVIEWER
Sim fanatic Jeff Lackey's been writing about PC games since 1980. The only reason we still keep him around is to make editor-in-chief Jeff Green feel young.
Current Faves: *Silent Hunter IV*
1UP.com Blog: Jeff_Lackey.1UP.com

ERIC NEIGHER
STAFF REVIEWER
Eric started gaming at 6 years old...and 21 years later, his parents still limit his gaming time to two hours a day.
Current Faves: *Europa Universalis III, Command & Conquer 3*
1UP.com Blog: TheFrimFramSauce.1UP.com



MATT PECKHAM
STAFF REVIEWER
If Matt Peckham were a war game, he'd have six sides, slide around on a little piece of plastic, take everything by turns, and smell like old glue.
Current Faves: *IL-2 Sturmovik: 1946*
1UP.com Blog: mattpeckham.1UP.com



CINDY YANS
STAFF REVIEWER
Ayep. Cindy were born in Bronx, NY. She done gradiated with a degree in Theatre. How she got ta writin' 'bout 'puter games is anybody's guess.
Current Faves: *World of WarCraft*
1UP.com Blog: Cindy_Yans.1UP.com

Head to ReviewCrew.1UP.com to meet all of the 1UP Network's expert reviewers.

Players can compose their own in-game music, just in case you always dreamed of hearing someone playing the *Star Wars* theme in The Prancing Pony.

STRIDER

J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S FICTION OBVIOUSLY SERVES AS THE GAME'S BIGGEST DRAW AND PROBABLY THE BIGGEST PAIN IN DEVELOPER TURBINE'S ASS

One purple shirt to rule them, one jaunty cap to find them, one fabulous cloak to bring them all and in good fashion bind them.

Crafting in the game is simplistic, but lying on anvils while NPCs bang hot iron on your crotch is great fun.

LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: SHADOWS OF ANGMAR

It's in the Baggins

PUBLISHER: **Midway** DEVELOPER: **Turbine** GENRE: **MMORPG** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 7GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **Massive-scale** VERSION REVIEWED: **1.3.10.4**

•**Hang in there through the Human and Hobbit newbie zone—it gets a lot cooler afterward.**

•**Remember that part in *The Two Towers* where Sam had to kill Shelob 20 times and then bring the venom sacs to the friendly quest-giver?**

REVIEW

EDITORS' CHOICE Games for Windows

The Lord of the Rings Online: *Shadows of Angmar* won't change the way you play MMOs. And, for once, I won't complain—because it's *awesome*. Sure, mechanically, it's pretty much a conglomeration of good ideas from other games, with no single element to really call its own...but all those disparate pieces combine perfectly. Combat's *World of WarCraft*–ish, with some *Final Fantasy XI*–style cooperative attacks thrown in. Character customization borrows that badge-hunting thing from *City of Heroes*, but actually does something fun with it. Players can accomplish deeds (killing lots of one type of creature within a region, frequently using a specific skill, or discovering all the significant landmarks in an area) that grant titles, traits, or virtues—the bread and butter of character customization. Higher levels impart more slots for assigning traits and virtues, which grant extra damage resistance, health- and power-regeneration bonuses, or entirely new attacks. Virtue bonuses start off tiny, but add up as more deeds are accomplished...and in the end, allow a lot of differentiation between characters, without the worry that you'll gimp yourself by putting a skill point in the wrong spot.

It's a little sad that the MMO geek community gets turned upside down when a game ships after it's *actually completed* and nearly bug-free. That, along with a cheap subscription fee, low system requirements, and a strong license, has already garnered *LOTRO* a frighteningly robust player population. While traipsing through Middle-earth on launch day, I had to shut off player names just to see the world through all the gold text hovering above the sea of humanity (and Elf-, Dwarf-, and Hobbit-anity). Yet, even on the most populous servers during peak hours, the login queue never exceeded 30 seconds. It's safe to call *LOTRO*'s launch the most successful kickoff since *WOW*.

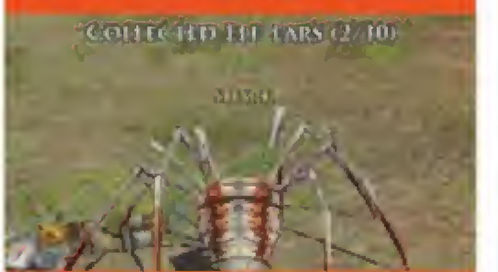
GEEK HEAVEN

J.R.R. Tolkien's *LOTR* fiction obviously serves as the game's biggest draw...and probably the biggest pain in developer Turbine's ass, given the tall task of satisfying a legion of nitpicky fans. The fidelity to the source material is such that you can literally navigate the world using those maps printed in your dog-eared paperback copy of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Remember that brief mention Sam made in a bar about his cousin seeing a giant somewhere north of the Brandywood? Go poking around up there, and you'll probably get your ass crushed by a level 30 giant. And when you meet Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, yes, you'll genuinely loathe the bitch.

The game's world is also a bit more low-key than we've come to expect from fantasy RPGs; after spending the last few years riding gryphons and summoning elementals to drop meteors, you might expect riding around on regular horses and flinging lighted acorns to be comparatively underwhelming. It isn't. Players obviously can't play as wizards, since Middle-earth only had five of those, but magic here is present in just about everything, though understated and nonspecific (like the "knowledge of ancient wisdom" of the Lore-master class)...which makes it all the more impressive on occasions when it shows up in full force.

The game's future is less clear. Its economy's still caught in the throes of postlaunch chaos, and the level 40–50 PVP zone (see sidebar) is still comparatively free of high-level players. A surprisingly large crop of *WOW* refugees has shown up, but whether *LOTRO* becomes just another rest stop on the path to the Next Big Thing or a place to set up long-term residence remains to be seen. Roads go ever on. • **Scott Sharkey**

BATTLE NOT WITH MONSTERS



•**I've always wanted to be a giant spider when I grew up.**

LOTRO takes a simple but clever tack with its PVP combat. At level 10, everyone can take the wheel of a level 50 orc (in one of three flavors), spider, or wolf and scuttle around the Ettenmoors, killing level 40–50 players. Monster characters don't gain levels, but may spend points and ranks (earned by killing hero players or completing evil quests) on new traits, abilities, and appearances. It seems like a smart way of including both level-capped players and more casual people who want to do a little casual murder on the side.

VERDICT

- **A perfect realization of a compelling world.**
- **No paradigms shifted. No conventions challenged.**

9/10 EXCELLENT

Games for Windows

• *ArmA* calculates realistic ballistic factors like bullet drop and recoil, so pull out your finest mouse.

ARMA: COMBAT OPERATIONS

Got real?

PUBLISHER: **Atari** DEVELOPER: **Bohemia Interactive** GENRE: **Tactical Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (www.sprocketidea.com)** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2GHz CPU, 512 MB RAM, 4GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2–100+ players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Gold Master**

REVIEW

Any game that bets the farm on its "realism" faces a difficult challenge. After all, real life is what we play games to get the hell *away from*, right? But when you're talking about military simulations like Bohemia Interactive's *ArmA: Combat Operations* (formerly titled *Armed Assault*), you're talking about a fan base that's hardcore enough to *almost* join the service—and that's a different breed of gamer. To be sure, *ArmA* has a company's worth of realism boxes checked: branching, open-ended missions, massive multiplayer potential (support for 100-plus players, including true co-op), destructible terrain, and even some pretty decent A.I.

Nevertheless, *ArmA* is, at its core, a computer game. At some point, it has to be conscious of the line between entertaining realism and boring old reality.

SHOOT FIRST

And if you're looking for an example of a game that walked the line like Johnny Cash, you need look no further than Bohemia's 2001 sleeper hit *Operation Flashpoint*. As with that game, *ArmA* (which Bohemia bills as an "official sequel") follows a small U.S. garrison defending a fictitious island nation. This time, the Americans find themselves guarding against an invasion by the island's much larger, commie-fied neighbor to the north. At various points throughout the game, you take on the role of grunt, squad leader, lone-wolf sniper, tank commander, demolitions man, and even helicopter pilot for the American forces. Every piece of ordnance you encounter is authentically simulated; from the ballistic properties of the rifles to the engine growl of a Humvee, *ArmA* tries to present you with the real soldier's experience.

Unfortunately, the "real" experience isn't all artillery and flashbangs—and that's where the issue of realism versus entertainment really comes home to roost. On some missions, you spend the equivalent of an entire *Command & Conquer 3* match just schlepping around in the back of a truck, waiting to get inserted. And *ArmA*'s extremely stingy with save games, so if you die (and you will), prepare to repeat those schleps till you just can't schlep no more. Of course, military buffs should appreciate that sort of verisimilitude, so it comes down to what melts your butter.

ASK QUESTIONS

ArmA's graphics, on the other hand, won't melt anything except your expectations—they suck (not your expectations, Mr. Dangling-modifier-noticer-man). The writing and voice acting, too, are as subpar as a Tiger Woods scorecard—in one hilarious instance, a U.S. soldier inexplicably switches to a thick Australian accent. No one seems to notice. Worse, though, is *ArmA*'s control scheme: vastly overcomplicated, poorly organized, and more counterproductive than a counter factory.

Are these problems endemic to any FPS that aims for authenticity? Does cleaving to "realism" limit the amount of entertainment you can get out of a game? Can you ever really please the casual gamers and the former SAS guys at the same time? I can't answer these questions for you yet (still waiting for my SAS diploma from the University of Phoenix), but I do know this: *ArmA* is a game best left to guys who know how to disassemble a .223 rifle.

• **Eric Neigher**

VERDICT

- **Wide-open gameplay; realistic depiction of modern combat; lots o' replay value.**
- **Weak graphics; chintzy production values; horrible interface; a little too realistic.**

6\10

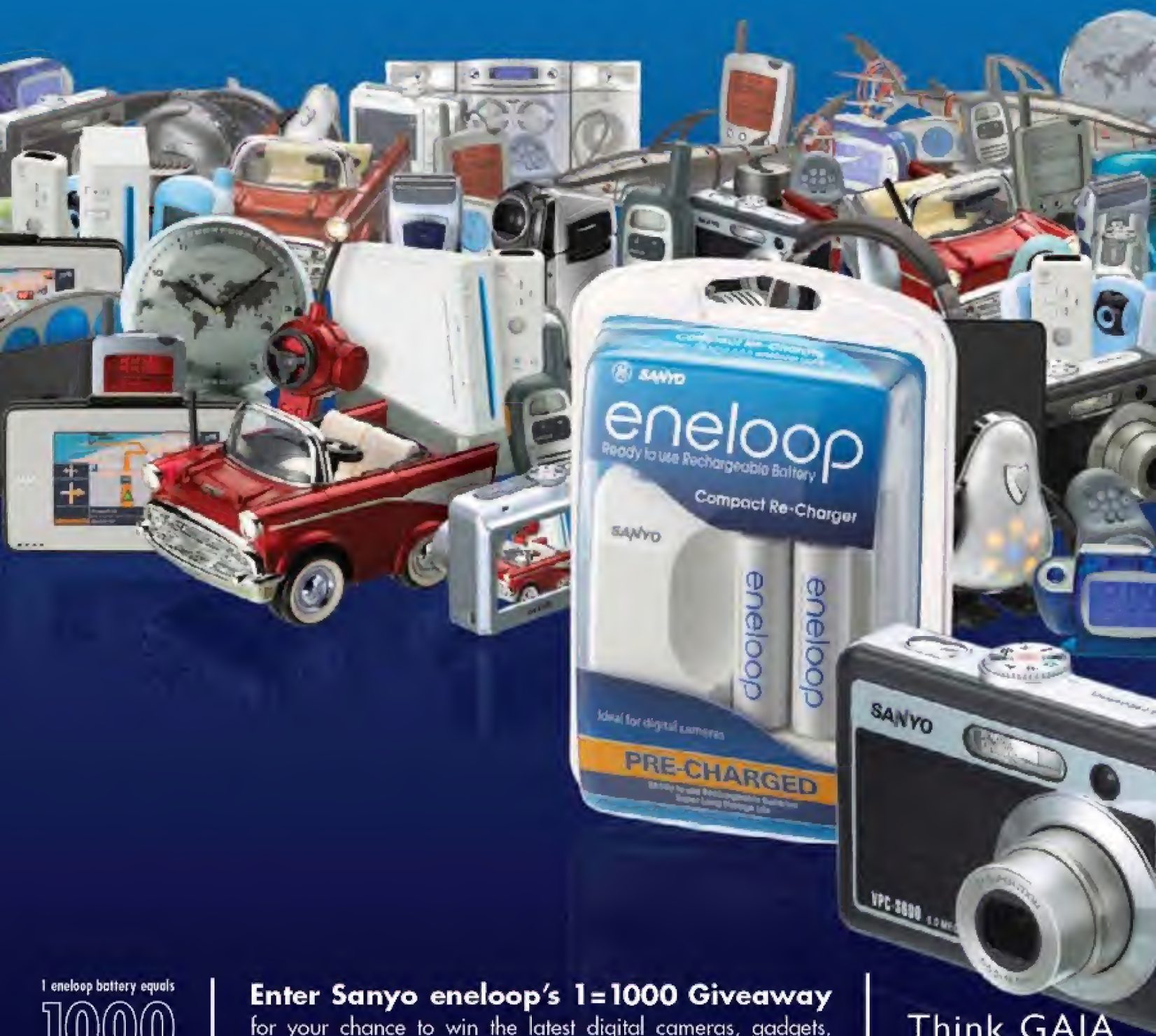
AVERAGE

Games for Windows THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

• **War is hell...except when you snipe some unsuspecting dumbass from a distance of 500 meters. Then it's totally awesome!**

SANYO

ONE BATTERY.
A THOUSAND PRIZES.*



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PENUMBRA: OVERTURE

Into the dark

PUBLISHER: **Got Game Entertainment/Strategy First** DEVELOPER: **Frictional Games** GENRE: **Adventure** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (www.penumbraoverture.com)** ESRB RATING: **Mature** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 1GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **E-tail**

REVIEW

The way I see it, anyone who decides to poke around a deserted mine should know what he's in for. The same goes for anyone who plays a horror game like *Penumbra: Overture*. The template was established 15 years ago by the original *Alone in the Dark*: You've got your shadowy corridors and creaking doors, your vicious hellhounds and giant worms, and your not-so-subtle references to H.P. Lovecraft. *Penumbra: Overture* hits all the old notes like the Stones on their tenth farewell tour.

The one thing that sets *Penumbra* apart is its use of realistic physics—pull the mouse toward you to pull open a drawer, move it to the side to drag a door shut, slide it in an arc to swing a pickax at a charging enemy.

It's a nifty idea, and when it works, it works well. But the middle of a fight against a hellhound is no time to discover that the mouse is an even worse tool than a Wii controller when it comes to precise aim. I found myself flailing at the air while Cujo merrily ripped my throat out (it also took me three swipes to smash a padlock...but at least the padlock wasn't trying to kill me).

> IT ALSO TOOK ME THREE SWIPES TO SMASH A PADLOCK...BUT AT LEAST THE PADLOCK WASN'T TRYING TO KILL ME

Genuinely eerie soundscaping and strong voice acting help enhance the atmosphere, and I admit that some scenes made me jump. But little here is fresh and new, and the one element that is—the control mechanism—frustrates as often as it delights. **Charles Ardai**

Good doggy, nice doggy...

VERDICT

- **Creepy, scary, and highly interactive environment.**
- **Innovative controls make for clumsy combat.**

5\10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

SAM & MAX: EPISODE 6—BRIGHT SIDE OF THE MOON

So this dog and this rabbit fly to the moon...

PUBLISHER: **Telltale Games/GameTap** DEVELOPER: **Telltale Games** GENRE: **Adventure** AVAILABILITY: **E-tail (www.gametap.com or www.telltalegames.com)** ESRB RATING: **Not Rated** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.5GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 245MB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Final Downloadable**

REVIEW

***Sam & Max* developer** Telltale Games deserves a medal, having successfully produced an episodic series of adventure games (six episodes in seven months) that resurrects a classic franchise without compromising the qualities that made it so beloved to begin with. *Bright Side of the Moon* brings *Sam & Max's* "first season" to a satisfying end, wrapping up the oddball mass-hypnosis plotline and bringing the Freelance Police face-to-face with the man behind it all, deep in the bowels of his lunar lair.

Episode 6 keeps the recurring gags going (career-challenged Sybil's now the Queen of Canada, paranoid inconvenience store owner Bosco is selling an earthquake-maker, and puzzle solutions still come in threes), but they're probably more entertaining here than in any previous installment. Same goes for the writing in general—series scribes Dave Grossman and Brendan Ferguson definitely have a handle on these characters, and the jokes maintain a consistent range of "funny" to "hilarious," from Sam's first glimpse of Bosco's latest ridiculous disguise, to Max's elated embrace of the series' Scientology send-up, to one particularly side-splitting sequence involving a quartet of fan-favorite characters from *Episode 5*.

When all's said and done, *Episode 6* (like its predecessors) doesn't stretch much past the two-hour mark, but it's all just as well, since the assorted puzzles never get tough enough to become frustrating, nor easy enough to insult you. Telltale's all but inherited Sierra and LucasArts' adventure-game crown with this well-crafted series, and if you're still holding out, now's the perfect time to play all six episodes back-to-back—like *Lost* or *Heroes*, *Sam & Max: Season 1* is best enjoyed in a marathon sitting. **Ryan Scott**

> TELLTALE'S ALL BUT INHERITED SIERRA AND LUCASARTS' ADVENTURE-GAME CROWN.

Max makes a thinly veiled jab at the criticisms of nitpicky game reviewers.

VERDICT

- **Puzzles strike a good balance; wonderful humor; a fitting end to the series.**
- **Short as usual; no more new episodes to look forward to just yet.**

8\10

GOOD

Games for Windows

Bazooka Joe fires a fin-stabilized rocket grenade at an AV. The ballistics modeling—line-of-sight issues notwithstanding—is terrific.

THEATRE OF WAR

Theatre of the absurd

PUBLISHER: **Battlefront.com** DEVELOPER: **1C Games** GENRE: **Historical Real-Time Strategy** AVAILABILITY: **E-tail (www.battlefront.com)** ESRB RATING: **Not Rated**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2.66Hz CPU, 1GB RAM, 3GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Gold Master**

REVIEW

About halfway through 1C Games' World War II RTS *Theatre of War*, I was tempted to pick up the mouse, wag it at the computer, and—heeding Peter Finch's call in 1976's *Network*—yell "I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!" But I kept on taking it anyway, as my platoon of German Pz IVs had to punch through a company of Soviet KV-1s and T-34s...and I was damned if the pinhead tactical A.I., AWOL features, and frivolous landscape scrub were going to stop me.

But stop me they did, like a steel wall of heavily entrenched Königstigers in some other, better game. While I had a decent rip with *Theatre of War*, I can't say I'll touch it again until it gets an overhaul—it's simply too undependable. For starters, you spend more time paused than plunging through the Axis or Allied European theater campaigns and solo battles, microherding because the A.I. lacks the autonomous know-how to tie its shoes. Squads under fire momentarily hug turf, then stand and charge bullet sprays like delusional supermen. Speedier armored vehicles rear-end slower tanks, then irrationally pull out of formation, dangerously exposing their flanks. Pinned gunners inexplicably break from their squads and lunge at the enemy without a "bold" or "heroic" psych indicator in sight. In short, destination trumps deliberation, making your soldiers act like robots.

I SEE YOU

Irrespective of nationality (Poland, Germany, Russia, France, U.S., U.K.) or weaponry, your computer opponent possesses the eyes and aim of a god, while your walking toolboxes shoot like Dick Cheney. Instruct your squads to attack, and they'll often respond with "don't have clear line of fire," which—since you don't get line-of-sight tracing lines—leaves you to guess by moving gunners around like hats on sticks. On the other hand, a single tank will reliably spot *your* "hidden" antitank guns at up to 1,000 tree-and-brush-choked meters, then proceed to one-shot liquidate both crews. Grass may not stop bullets, but when the enemy can see prone weed-covered teams half a map away, either someone was bitten by a radioactive spider, or the sighting algorithm's fishy.

On the upside, the game models stuff like vehicle armor levels and facing, different ammo types, and much of the ballistic miscellany that war gamers tend to rhapsodize. But then it goes and breaks command and control by forgoing must-haves like waypoints—a death kiss for any company-level RTS.

EVERYBODY WANTS TO BE SQUAD LEADER

When a war-game skunk works like Battlefront launches a new game, it's like an arm reaches through the clouds (cue the ringing hosannas). Figure in the guys behind *IL-2 Sturmovik*, and you half expect something to drop through columns of diapered cherubim. How two quality ops managed to screw up *Theatre of War* is anyone's guess, but they did—and with the genre on life support as it is, that's a serious bummer. • **Matt Peckham**

VERDICT

4\10

BAD

- **Historically detailed units and vehicles; realistic ballistics.**
- **Unrealistic enemy A.I.; no option to set waypoints or check line of sight.**

Games for Windows

YOUR COMPUTER OPPONENT POSSESSES THE EYES AND AIM OF A GOD. WHILE YOUR WALKING TOOLBOXES SHOOT LIKE DICK CHENEY

• **Vehicles are modeled with exceptional historical accuracy, right down to precise gunnery, ammo loads, engine speeds, and armor thickness.**

ANCIENT WARS: SPARTA

Before the reign of baklava, Leonidas dined on Xerxes

PUBLISHER: **Playlogic/Eidos Interactive** DEVELOPER: **World Forge** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **800MHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 3GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

If you're the type that hears "hoplite" and thinks, "Mmmmm, reduced-calorie beeeeeer," perhaps you're not overly excited about what was going on in pre-Peloponnesian War Greece. But *Ancient Wars: Sparta* re-creates that wartime drama—sometimes with panache, but often with an eye-roll-inspiring clumsiness that we see in a lot of middle-of-the-road RTS games.

Dare we say cookie-cutter execution? Dare we say formulaic? Dare we say template *à la mode*? Well, the resource gathering, economy management, "base" building, and three-faction conflict structure are classic, so it's a dare well taken. And you've seen it done with much more style and far fewer glitches.

Really bad pathfinding, bad management of choke points, embarrassing dialogue, watered-down storyline, and those "click a unit and it says *this*, over and over again" annoyances (was "zug-zug" actually cute at one point?) drag down the game, and its tightly restricted terrain is very limiting. This is all a shame, because *Sparta* has some really lovely features: unit creation that involves directly equipping each type so you can control their cost and effect in combat; crisp and enchanting graphics; fun trap-setting; the ability to collect dropped enemy weapons and absorb their technology; do-it-yourself cavalry creation...this stuff would probably prevent you from ditching it after a few hours.

But it's not enough. If RTS games were scarce right about now, *Sparta* might have generated a little more fanfare, but with games like *Command & Conquer 3* and *Supreme Commander* up its butt, well...let's just say that the eclipse is complete.

• Cindy Yans

• The Elves always bring up the rear. Not Elves? Oh.

DARE WE SAY COOKIE-CUTTER EXECUTION? DARE WE SAY FORMULAIC? DARE WE SAY TEMPLATE *À LA MODE*?

VERDICT

+ Lots of eye candy; a few new ideas, such as enemy weapon gathering.

– Awful pathfinding; no apparent waypoint system; mediocre maps.

5\10 AVERAGE

Games for Windows

WHIRLWIND OVER VIETNAM

If only the war had been this short

PUBLISHER: **Evolved Games** DEVELOPER: **65 Software** GENRE: **Simulation** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Gold Master**

REVIEW

The Vietnam War, with its jungle terrain and hit-and-run style combat, paints the perfect setting for a great combat helicopter simulation. Unfortunately, we must conclude that the need for said chopper sim remains unfilled. *Whirlwind Over Vietnam* appears to be based on good intent...but doomed to failure due to an overly simplistic plan and execution.

MAYDAY! MAYDAY!

The game's setting teems with potential. You play the role of a UH-1B Huey pilot in the dramatic battles in the Ia Drang Valley in late 1965, and while the pilot is the game's key role, you can switch between the roles of the pilot, copilot, and gunner at any time. The problem is the severe lack of content: You get a sum total of 10 scripted missions in a linear campaign. While the flight model is good for a casual sim, the game just doesn't have much meat on it. You fly to a target, shoot it up (only one mission features any *truly* threatening return fire), then fly home. The radio chatter does an admirable job of telling a dramatic story, but it doesn't change the short, simplistic, and repetitive action: Find the bridge/boats/vehicles/guns/infantry, shoot 'em, then come back. No multiplayer. No mission creator. I finished all 10 missions in three hours...and then it was game over.

The flight-sim world craves a good Vietnam-era helicopter sim, but *Whirlwind Over Vietnam*'s anemic content would've been more suitable for a good demo than a full game. **• Jeff Lackey**

I FINISHED ALL 10 MISSIONS IN THREE HOURS... AND THEN IT WAS GAME OVER.

• A rare sight in *Whirlwind Over Vietnam*: damage to your chopper.

VERDICT

+ Perfect setting for a chopper sim; radio chat tells a story.

– The entire game consists of only 10 scripted missions.

4\10 BAD

Games for Windows

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Because you know it's the first thing you always do, climb the Empire State Building...and take a crack at one of the toughest skydiving challenges ever.

SPIDER-MAN 3

Smack attack in black

PUBLISHER: **Activision** DEVELOPER: **Treyarch** GENRE: **Action** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2.8GHz CPU, 1GB RAM (XP)/1.5GB RAM (Vista), 6.6GB hard drive space, 256MB videocard (gamepad recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

Thank goodness for tall buildings. Without 'em, Spider-Man would be pretty screwed. He's not much of a runner, can't leap more than a traffic light in a single bound, and clings to the ground on all fours. Go Sticks-to-Sidewalk-Man. Those skyscrapers are practically cloud busters in Treyarch's bigger, smoggier, and ultimately busier *Spider-Man 3*...though you'll still spend dizzying amounts of time logging eventless miles on your invisible odometer as you swing, yo-yo, and slingshot between semi-interesting cityscape to-dos. Hey, if anything, it's a superheroic leap over The Fizz Factor's disgraceful PC version of *Spider-Man 2*.

EVERYBODY WAS WEB-FU FIGHTING

Even the console version of *Spider-Man 2* was a colossal vacuum—a monster megalopolis plagued by soulless facades and mission déjà vu. *Spider-Man 3* doesn't make the urban jungle any less shallow, and you still can't enter most buildings, biff wandering pedestrians, or snarl traffic by standing in the middle of intersections (you just get run over). But this isn't *The Elder Scrolls: Spidey*, and core play still rallies around goof-off acrobatics, token hunts, scripted missions, and smacking around superhoodlums. What's improved? All of the above...more or less.

Remember chasing balloons and snatching purse thieves? Presto gone-o. Instead, the city's now pieced into areas—call them gangland turf—with colors (red, yellow, green) indicating crime rates. You still pound your share of faceless carjackers, street punks, and costumed goofballs, but you also occasionally receive individualized errands like rescuing bank hostages, stalking sequestered gangs, or disabling bombs via cathartic button-mashing minigames. The only downside? Cleanup has no discernible impact on crime frequency, which kind of damps your incentive.

Story missions offer more length and variety, diverting between one-way interior crawls (hunt Dr. Curt "The Lizard" Connors, infiltrate Scorpion's science lab, navigate a burning building) and outdoor scrambles (catch the falling dude, chase the helicopter, pick off the snipers). Unfortunately, most boss battles still play out in closed arenas, sometimes hobbling you with annoying penalties. In one sewer-based battle with the Lizard, for instance, you can't wall-climb—presumably an odds-evener. Weak.

MY HANDS! MY HANDS!

Otherwise, you'll either love or hate the hyped-up combo-fueled melee. I often wonder what it'd feel like tying my fingers in pretzels, and now I know. *Spider-Man 3* is the *Twister* of punch-kick slap-downs, one of the most frenzied onslaughts of digital derring-do I've wrung my metacarpals through since *Ninja Gaiden*. And that's using a gamepad—don't bother at all with a keyboard and mouse.

Part of the problem's an occasional lapse into punitive contrivance. At one point, you're supposed to lift debris off rail tracks by pounding two buttons...except you can't, until you clobber a platoon of respawning lizards. Even using your spider sense (bullet-time slowdown) or donning your new dusky duds (which merely buff your powers or let you go berserk) isn't enough to make incidents like this less than a dozen-try affair. But if you're up to it, this is certainly the best *Spider-Man* game that's graced a PC yet, even if it's also one of the toughest. **Matt Peckham**

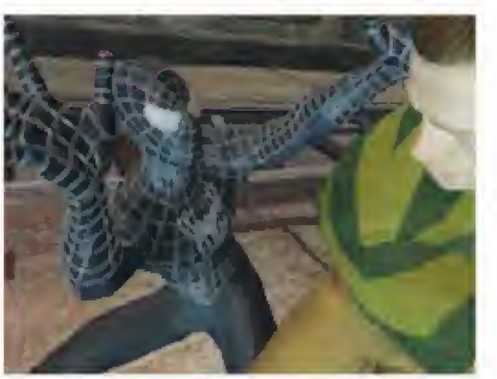
VERDICT

- **Well-crafted city; intricate story missions; improved random crime-fighting.**
- **Superficial crime-rate system; arbitrarily difficult areas; caged-in boss battles.**

7\10

GOOD

Games for Windows THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE



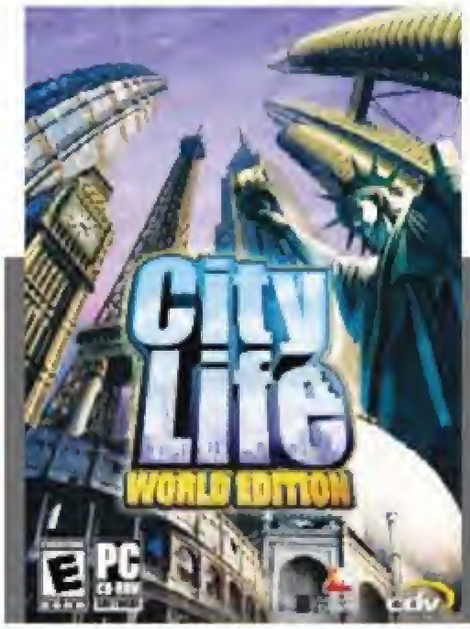
This looks way more interesting than it really is. Actually, you're just pressing buttons when Simon—er, the game—says.

THE HOT LIST

Five still-available games to buy right now

SIM RECOMMENDATIONS

If you're jonesing for a good strategic city-sim game to play after perusing our *SimCity* cover story, here are five of our favorites.



CITY LIFE: WORLD EDITION

Some might say that CDV Software's critically acclaimed city-builder *City Life* beat *SimCity: Societies* to the punch, focusing predominantly on your dream city's societal interaction rather than its topography. The similarities are ultimately superficial, though, as *City Life* is all about balancing the wants and desires of society's "haves" and "have-nots" while dealing with their perpetual disdain for one another. The recent *World Edition* adds a pile o' new buildings to the game, making for a welcome influx of variety that the original release lacked.

MONOPOLY TYCOON

No, your eyes do not deceive you: Here's a good game with the word "Tycoon" in the title. Like its board game namesake, *Monopoly Tycoon* furnishes gamers with economic goals that revolve around outbidding your opponents for key pieces of real estate...and milking every square inch of that land for as long as possible. But here you can build various types of businesses, gouge your competitors on rent, and initiate what essentially amounts to hostile takeovers of their turf. It's a fresh and surprisingly engaging take on *Monopoly* that any strategy and city-sim fan should check out.

PORT ROYALE 2

While it isn't a city simulator in the traditional sense, *Port Royale 2* is a simple-yet-enjoyable strategic game that's all about pirates. As a Caribbean ship captain, you'll run missions for (or against) several nations—trading goods, sacking ships, and even engaging in swordfights as you help develop allied port cities beyond their humble roots. Not many sims successfully integrate economics and combat (unless you go the RTS route), but *Port Royale 2*'s a high-sailing marriage of the two.

TROPICO: MUCHO MACHO EDITION

Ever wanted a *SimCity* with a tropical island theme? Take a look at PopTop Software's *Tropico*, where you can slip into the sand-filled shoes of over two dozen historical dictators struggling to grow fat off of a lush island paradise—and its people. Court tourists, engage in some meaningful (and perhaps profitable) diplomacy with foreign powers, give your populace some well-deserved entertainment, and participate in democratic elections to ensure that you stay in your position of power. Or just crush everyone under your heel until they revolt and burn down the whole freakin' place.

SIMCITY 4: DELUXE EDITION

Dense as it ultimately is, *SimCity 4* does a good job of addressing some of *SimCity 3000*'s foibles and providing greenhorn city planners with a bit more direction during the tutorial process. The *Rush Hour* expansion (included in the *Deluxe Edition*) really makes *SimCity 4* shine, with its handful of vehicle-related side missions and public transit options. Newbies may find it a tad vexing, but *SimCity 4*'s the best one since the original.

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Game names in yellow indicate *GFW* Editors' Choice award winners

GAME TITLE	SCORE	ISSUE
1701 A.D.	8	3
Agatha Christie: Murder on the Orient Express	2	3
ArchLord	4	3
Battlestations: Midway	5	5
Blitzkrieg II: Fall of the Reich	5	6
City Life: World Edition	8.5	6
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	9	6
D.I.R.T.: Origin of the Species	5	3
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EverQuest II: Echoes of Faydwer	8	3
Flyboys Squadron	3	4
Forge of Freedom	6	4
Galactic Civilizations II: Dark Avatar	9	6
Genesis Rising: The Universal Crusade	3	7
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Heroes of Might and Magic V: Hammers of Fate	6	3
IL-2 Sturmovik: 1946	10	7
Infernal	6	7
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LOTR: The Battle for Middle-earth II: The Rise of the Witch-king	6	3
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Silverfall	3	7
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Supreme Commander	7	5
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Titan Quest: Immortal Throne	9	5
Top Spin 2	6	7
Vanguard: Saga of Heroes	3	6
War Front: Turning Point	5	5
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• Greetings from The Prancing Pony!

• Greetings from Bindbole Wood!

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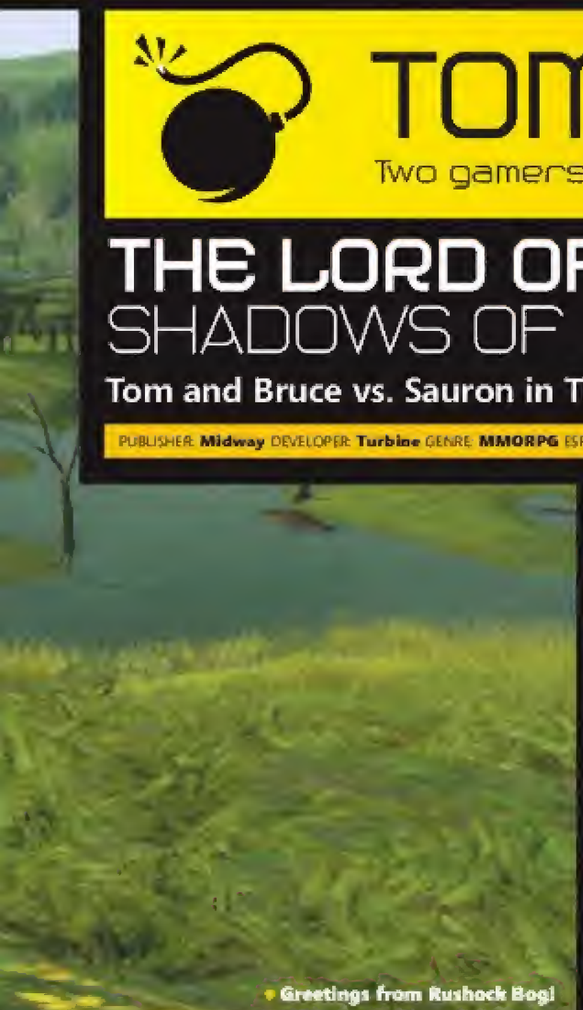


TOM vs. BRUCE

Two gamers enter. One gamer wins.

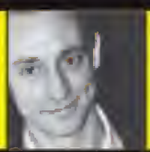
THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: SHADOWS OF ANGMAR

Tom and Bruce vs. Sauron in Turbine's great Tolkien MMO

PUBLISHER: **Midway** DEVELOPER: **Turbine** GENRE: **MMORPG** ESRB RATING: **Teen**

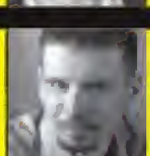
• Greetings from Rushock Bog!

COLUMN



Tom Chick

Prominent freelance videogame critic Tom Chick also runs the popular website QuarterToThree.com.



Bruce Geryk

Bruce Geryk—brainy brain surgeon by day—is *GFW*'s resident expert on anything involving a hex grid.

BRUCE: I play games for relaxation, so imagine my surprise when *The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar* tells me before I've even started the game that "our worst fears have come to pass." They have? Holy crap. Then what am I doing sitting here playing a computer game? Oh, wait—our worst fears *in the game*? OK. I'm not sure what those fears could be. The game is totally buggy? Playing the game will weaken America? Somebody misspelled something in Elvish? And if that's the case, why wouldn't the developers fix those problems before release, instead of just putting in some afterthought cut-putting in some afterthought cut-scene disclaimer in a faux Gandalf voice? That really doesn't bode too well for *Lord of the Rings Online*.

TOM: Actually, a lot of things don't bode well for this game. For starters, it's been passed around to various publishers before ending up with Midway, the folks who brought you *Midway Arcade Treasures XII* and other decidedly non-MMO properties like *Mortal Kombat*. Furthermore, *The Lord of the Rings Online* was created by Turbine, whose credits include *Asheron's Call 2*, one of the few MMOs that was bad enough to actually shut down. In case you're not familiar with the genre, few MMOs die. Instead, they're acquired by Sony Online and folded into Station.com. However, the good news is this: *The Lord of the Rings Online* is great. But I don't tell Bruce this. I'll just let him find out for himself.

BRUCE: I'm a huge skeptic about the whole role-playing aspect of anything you might think of playing a role about. That's why I'm not entirely able to describe the feeling I get when I make my first Dwarf character and I go through one of the introductory instances/cut-scenes, and at the end I run into Gandalf, who says something about how I should tell him my story because it's probably a really interesting one. And I'm all like, "*Whoa! Gandalf wants to talk to me! How cool is this stuff!*" But then Tom tells me that, according to the deal our agent negotiated for us, we are contractually obligated to play as Hobbits. So I delete my Dwarf and name a character after Robert Fripp. If you know who that is without using the Internet, congratulations: You're old.

TOM: I had to think up some reason to mandate that we start out in the Shire, because it's one of the best parts of the game, and it's a great hook to get someone interested. I know this because I've been playing *The Lord of the Rings Online* since the open beta began. I've got a character of every race, I've seen all the starting areas, and I've dabbled in most of the classes. My character with Bruce is just an alt. His name is Tomwise. He's a Hobbit burglar, jeweler, and prospector. When he's not veering off course to chip away at an ore node with my pickax, he's using the inspect command on low-level characters to see if they're wearing any jewelry. Usually, they're not. So I offer to sell them copper rings and necklaces for a decent price. I'm only slightly less annoying than a gold spammer. But it's a living. I make a few more copper pieces than I would selling my wares to the vendors.

BRUCE: Unlike Tom, I'm a big fan of *The Lord of the Rings*. While he's off calculating how many shekels he can earn by crafting jewelry—which I don't believe was ever depicted in the official *The Lord of the Rings* history, by the way—I'm admiring how well Turbine managed to re-create the actual Middle-earth land of historical fact. Unlike other games, where you are in the scary demon forest and then go through a short tunnel to emerge at the North Pole, The Shire à la Turbine is a pretty consistently Shire-y place. There are fields and farms, and when you run from village to village, you never have to wonder why a whole bunch of monsters are standing in a group just off the road, doing nothing in particular. It's simply foxes and bears and all the things you'd expect to find in Franco's Spain. I mean, in *Pan's Labyrinth*. Which is a whole lot like *The Lord of the Rings Online*.

TOM: See? I told you the Shire was good. Even Bruce Geryk likes it!

BRUCE: *LOTRO* is so much not a monster reservation that, at one point, Tom and I get a quest to go kill some goblins. First we talk to this guy, who tells us he has seen some goblins lurking around the edges of this forest. And I'm all like, "You're kidding—there are goblins around? I gotta go check that out, because all I've seen around here are bears, foxes, and Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco."

TOM: Bruce and I start out delivering satchels of mail, avoiding nosy Hobbits. We plot out the best order to do what is almost literally a series of FedEx quests. Because I don't want to just walk him through the game, I let Bruce go first. This lets him learn valuable life lessons like "you can't carry a satchel of mail through the water."

BRUCE: Another great lesson leads to the discovery of the best massively multiplayer invention ever: You can jump when you're running, *but it slows you down*.

TOM: We also do some pie-delivery quests. Now our minimaps display hungry Hobbits along with >

• Greetings from Michel Delving!

nosy hobbits. The Shire is a place with its own brand of danger.

BRUCE: This, on the other hand, is a pretty dumb game mechanic.

TOM: Unlike Bruce, I have developed the skill of avoiding patrol paths by extensive playing of *Metal Gear Solid* games.

BRUCE: I got so carried away by Gandalf wanting to have a personal conversation with me that I forgot to mention probably the most important thing about my time in *The Lord of the Rings Online*: I'm a minstrel. Yeah, I know. Turbine has done an interesting job of integrating the decidedly nonviolent minstrel skill set into a fantasy-adventure combat game, in that it appears that they never really tried. Because I am such a master of roleplaying, I could probably act out for you right now the scene at Turbine where everybody just decided to avoid the design problem inherent in having a bard character fight skeletons with music. I don't have space here for the whole play, but part of it involves some guy saying, "Dude, you just rock out and it fights the goblins!" while pretending to be Jimmy Page and wearing wizard pants. And then everyone else at Turbine is like, "Yeah, we can't think of anything good, either. And please change, because while we don't have an official dress code, the pants from the 1975 Led Zeppelin tour are kind of over the line."

TOM: Once we've gotten to know the Shire, we start doing some of the story quests, which consist of furtive visits to a back room in The Prancing Pony where Strider hangs out and entertains an endless succession of player characters, doling out bits of the story in the process. This is a lot of what makes *The Lord of the Rings Online* so appealing to me: There's a familiar narrative thread and we get to ride its coattails, appearing around the periphery of famous events as if we were in the Middle-earth version of *Forrest Gump*. For instance, we have to visit Fredegar "Fatty" Bolger, who was manning Frodo's house to throw off the Nazgul. Sauron's crebain, which are these really mean crows, attack him. We reenact a scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*, with Bolger in the role of Tippi Hedren. After a couple of tries, we manage to protect him from the evil birds, one of which flies off into the Old Forest.

BRUCE: Because Tom ruined it for me, I'm going to ruin it for you: When you run through the Old Forest, trees can attack you. Yeah, I know—that's the kind of thing that games are great at doing unexpectedly, right? So you can thank Tom for telling me while I'm entering the forest, "Hey, watch out for the trees, *because they might attack you.*"

TOM: It was unfortunate that I had to ruin this for Bruce, because it's a great moment when that tree rustles and shakes and then rips its roots out of the ground and starts coming at you. But the problem with trees attacking Bruce is that they will also be attacking me. Being a relatively low-level minstrel and burglar, we're not quite ready to take on trees. We did, however, fight a swarm of bees earlier. I punched every bee in the face.

BRUCE: I am consistently pleasantly surprised by how well *LOTRO* re-creates MMO versions of locales that, due to my degree in Tolkien history and folklore, I feel familiar with already. The Old Forest is a particularly good example. It's kind of creepy, because the art direction is just good enough to play on the expectation that I have that it's going to be creepy in the first place. This is how established IP so easily trumps original IP: I've had 30 years to imagine what the Old Forest looks like.

TOM: Now we meet up with Tom Bombadil, who gives us +8 Hope along with a sunbeam from the heavens. Tom B is awesome, even if he is a bit fruity. He sends us after a few lilies that grow under the drooping limbs of Old Man Willow, who constantly drains our power. You can understand why a Hobbit might want to lie down here and just sleep forever.

BRUCE: The movies that Tom thinks are where *The Lord of the Rings* came from ended up not including Tom Bombadil. Tom thinks this is because that whole thing never actually happened. I think this part of the movies were on Rose Mary Woods' 18 1/2 minutes of blank tape. A crazy Internet conspiracy theory, though, says that it was because it was too hard to film and stay consistent with the rest of the presentation. So it shouldn't surprise you that I'm about to debunk yet another improbable Internet myth by revealing that it's totally possible to have Tom Bombadil in a realistic *The Lord of the Rings* game, *and Turbine has figured out how to do it.* Here is its secret: Everything is kind of too bright, and you get that scary Peter Jackson Ring Effect all the time, and Tom Bombadil is just some guy you can't make out too well, but he gives you extra Hope. Hope is an actual character stat that I didn't think made any sense until I realized I could tell Tom that "I've got a New Hope!" every time my Hope went up.

TOM: One of the things I really like in *The Lord of the Rings Online* is that, unlike me and Bruce and *World of WarCraft*, it doesn't constantly veer outside itself to refer to things like *Star Wars*, the Nixon administration, and the music Bruce listened to in college. It's earnest and self-contained and not at all cartoony. As a result, there are fewer fans of *Ren & Stimpy* running around in here, acting like jackasses.

BRUCE: One of the benefits of portraying the Shire so consistently is that it gives you a real sense of travel. When you cross into the Barrow-downs, you get the sense that things aren't quite right. Of course, you can also thank J.R.R. Tolkien for writing a bunch of books about this that already set everything up in my mind before I get there.

TOM: We die a couple of times in the Barrow-downs. I blame Bruce, because it's always the healer's fault. But it's also because there are only two of us. One of the problems with this game, and many MMOs, is that it expects you to group. We've been able to piggyback onto other people doing things like saving Fatty from the birds or getting a goblin skull from the spider cave at Scary's quarry in Scary. But without committing to a full six-Man/Hobbit/Dwarf/Elf Fellowship, there's no way we're ready for the Great Barrows, which is the final chapter of Book I and a really kick-ass instance that later opens up into a really kick-ass bigger instance. The sad fact of the matter is that we're stalled, and now I face the prospect of listening to Bruce try to play his lute.

BRUCE: One reason I wanted to be a minstrel is that *LOTRO* has this completely amazing deal where you can play actual instruments with your keyboard, rather than just triggering premade music tracks. Even more amazingly, Turbine realized how annoying this could potentially be, and made sure to include a separate sound slider *just for player-made music*. Whoever thought of it should get the Oscar for Best Game Idea right there, although it would actually be a big fight with the "jumpers run slower" guy. My goal was to get a lute and dig out the old sheet music I have for "Stairway to Heaven" and play it on my keyboard. Then Tom told me that he heard someone playing "Stairway to Heaven" at The Prancing Pony Inn, and I immediately lost all interest.

TOM: The guy playing "Stairway" then transitioned into doing the "Imperial March" from *Empire Strikes Back*. That's the thing about MMOs: If the game doesn't mess it up, the people themselves will.

BRUCE: *LOTRO* has a lot of cool ideas that are just slightly different from the way all other MMOs did the exact same thing, so in that way it's like every good MMO ever released, except the first one. I love the deeds and feats, even though I have no idea what they are. It's all so familiar, yet done very well. And it all stops at about level 20, because I guess they ran out of time. That's a shame, because it's a disservice to all the characters who gave their lives in the service of the real *The Lord of the Rings*.

TOM: I haven't quite explained this to Bruce yet, but it seems to pick up around level 30 or so, particularly if you can hook up with a good group. I've had some luck powering past the long, empty stretches with my main character. And Turbine has announced new content that should be live by the time you read this.

BRUCE: I guess that's because in the real *Lord of the Rings*, things were slow between levels 20 and 30. So it's not Turbine's fault, because that's just how it has to be. While I can guarantee you I'm never going to get close to level 30, *LOTRO* is already one of my favorite games, because it reminded me I have an old Led Zeppelin songbook. The best games are all about your memories. •

MY GOAL WAS TO GET A LUTE AND DIG OUT THE OLD SHEET MUSIC TO "STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN."

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TOM AND BRUCE 1 MILLION, SAURON 0

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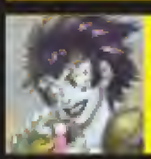
CRISIS ON INFINITE SE

Trekking across the vast MMORPG landscape

• Don't let them fool you. They're not happy and they're not having fun.

THIS MONTH: A GUILD-FREE ZONE

COLUMN



Cindy Yans

Cindy is probably, at this very moment, fleeing from psychotic, raid-organizing, meeting-tainted guild recruiters.

So, I'm minding my own business, farming rat whiskers, and some fellow who calls himself "KnifeMe" hits me with an unsolicited whisper:

"U wan join up w/ a kickass PVP guild? We recruting heavy time specially 4 healerz."

"Um, no thank you."

"y r u not guilded?"

"I'm a bit 'guild shy' at the moment."

"Oh y is that?"

"It's a long story, but anyway...OK, do you have a website I can visit that explains your guild's philosophy?"

"no i just started it me n my bother."

Sigh. "Um, no, really, I'm not interested."

"u gotta hava guild n this one is gonna be UBER lol. We calling it Oafkin Croop's Dueling Cocks."

I nearly faint when he spells "dueling" correctly.

"/ignore KnifeMe."

LINE OF ATTACK

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

COLUMN

Bruce Geryk

Bruce Geryk—brainy brain surgeon by day—is *GFW*'s resident expert on anything involving a hex grid.

What makes a real world war? You can have all the countries drawn right and the little pictures of tanks and ships and planes just so, but what keeps you playing all those turns? For me, it's a sense that through all the decisions I make I'm building a military juggernaut. That's the best thing that *Making History: The Calm & the Storm* by Muzzy Lane Software does. Recently published by Strategy First, it divides the world into provinces, and divides the war into individual weeks. It's like a combination of Gary Grigsby's *World at War* and Paradox's *Hearts of Iron*. Somewhere in there it breaks down a bit. But the basic idea shines through.

The war in 1945 was much different from that in 1939, and not just because the tanks were bigger. You get a feel for this through a combination of carrying out research projects and building units in individual cities so that you get a sense for your expanding production capacity as you rampage through either Europe or Asia. You can actually play any number of countries, as in *Hearts of Iron*, but the engine isn't anywhere near as detailed and fiddly. It's much more politically detailed than Hubert Cater's *Strategic Command* or Grigsby's *World at War*, but the results can vary between the ahistorical and the bizarre. Trade-offs are everywhere. How did the "British Alliance" manage to invade Pomerania in 1939? Why did Britain declare war on the U.S.S.R.? Don't think about it too much.

• Hitler

• Tojo

Slitherine, developer of *Legion Arena*, is working on *Commander—Europe at War*, which takes a more traditional hex-based approach to global war, as in *Strategic Command*. I hope to have a preview for you next time.

You can download the *Making History* demo from www.making-history.com. •

RVERS

• In *Guild Wars*, you just can't escape it.

• Cheese, indeed.

INVITATIONS, NINJA STYLE

Ninja guild invites bug the crap out of me. Ninja group invites do, as well. In fact, *any* private message from someone who doesn't know me is immediately suspect (especially if it includes the phrase "$$ cheap gold $$"). As a maxed-out healer on several MMO fronts, I get a lot of that sort of thing. I reply to the group invites using an invariably polite macro that says something like "I'm sorry. I'm with a party that I cannot leave at the moment, but thank you for thinking of me, and good luck!" Gag. But it works...and sometimes they even reply with something brilliantly clever, like "You too. Take care!"

But with guild invites, I feel strangled by a cravat of turmoil, brought on by uncomfortable memories of guilds I have known. I ask myself, "Do all guilds consist primarily of a bunch of psychotic weenies with emotional issues? Or have I just been really good at joining the ones that are?" I've gotten reprimanded for not saying "Hi!!! :)" immediately upon entering guild chat; for talking too little; for talking too much; for not dropping everything I'm doing to run to the other end of the universe to assist a bunch of people I'd never ever associate with in real life; for not participating in the "Ding! Gratz!" paradigm...and I've been accused of any number of other atrocities.

WHERE DO THEY FIND THESE PEOPLE?

The last guild to kick me out was run by a female Dwarf with perpetual PMS who was looking for affirmation from other carebear boys and girls so that they may sing "Kumbaya," have scavenger hunts, and share their MySpace accounts. When a difference of opinion led to my unceremonious booting, she told my former guildmates—and anyone else who would listen—that I was kicked out for trying to have sex with her over TeamSpeak. Seriously.

In another guild, I made the mistake of being empathic with a guy who possessed all the typical traits of a wrist cutter. He was a tank—a *terrible* tank—and no one wanted to group with him. I'm no longer guilded there, but this guy still jumps on me the second I log in, shouts "MEOW," tells me how miserable he is, and then invites me to group with him. I'm running out of excuses.

And let's not forget the l33t powergamers whose main focus is to flex their e-peens in public forums. Listening to them converse is more painful than reading Ann Coulter while deeply inhaling fumes from a burning plastics factory.

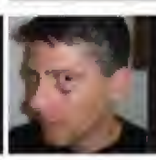
Can we all agree that the trouble with MMOs is that other people suck? *You* never suck. It's all of *them* that suck. Just remember that, and you'll be a lot lonelier...er, happier. Play solo. Construct a few refusal macros. Attend a kiting seminar. Just say no to guilds! •

THE TROUBLE WITH MMOS IS THAT OTHER PEOPLE SUCK... *YOU* NEVER SUCK. IT'S ALL OF *THEM* THAT SUCK.

FALLING PIECES

The best in casual games

COLUMN



Robert Coffey

Former *CGW* editor Robert Coffey now spends his days playing word games and block puzzles. What a life!

My biggest challenge in finding a game to cover this month: mustering the personal willpower to tear myself away from *Peggle Deluxe* long enough to give a few games a shot. Sadly, most of the casual games I sampled were dead to me well before their 60-minute trial time expired. Just when it looked like I'd be devoting an entire column to *Peggle* strategies, one game grabbed me. Did it kill my *Peggle* addiction? No—it just compounded the problem, consuming a near-equal amount of my free time.

IT'S SIMILAR TO *MAGIC THE GATHERING* ONLY IT'S NOT ENGINEERED FOR IDIOT SAVANTS

Astral Masters is a fantasy-based card game similar to *Magic: The Gathering*, only it's not engineered for an audience of idiot savants—good news for plain old idiots like me...and, if I may, you. A mere 200 cards populate the game, but thousands of strategies can be pursued through clever deck building. Similar to the *World of WarCraft* card game, you sacrifice spells and creature cards to build up your astral power, which in turn supplies your mana. While the cards are divided into lamentably predictable elemental categories, almost every card features a special ability that significantly enhances potential strategies and provides some personality.

Astral Masters also sports a slyly addictive single-player tournament mode; these eight-round contests are fun, but more importantly, they let you unlock new cards and earn in-game currency that allows you to "purchase" the cards for your custom decks. The tournaments re-create a decent multiplayer experience, insofar as the opponents you face in each of the eight rounds really feel and play differently. You can have an experience every bit as infuriating (and, should you win, every bit as satisfying) as playing some land-destruction jerk in *Magic Online*. And if you don't want to simulate a multiplayer experience, plenty of *real* players are dying to crush you online. Download the 60-minute demo or the full $20 game at www.astralmasters.com. •

• With all of its Faerie Dancers, Faerie Lords, and Goblin Slingers, *Astral Masters* isn't exactly the butchest game on the block.

SOUND OFF

Things you might hear on the GFW Radio podcast

ROUND TABLE

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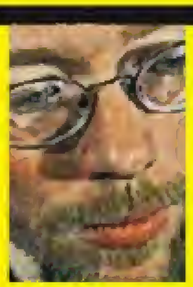

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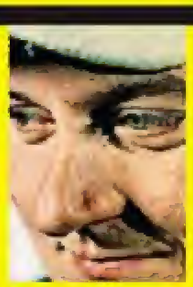

Shawn Elliott
Editor

Every week, the editors of *GFW* toss aside their inhibitions on *GFW Radio*, a podcast (it's like a magazine, only talked!) dedicated to what we love and loathe in the computer-gaming world. Subscribe at podcasts.1UP.com or the all-powerful iTunes Music Store. Want a sample of the hijinks? Here's a conversation around the office inspired by a recent podcast.

THIS MONTH'S TOPIC: How awesome is *StarCraft 2* gonna be?

SEAN: OK, so that game announcement was probably the least shocking "secret" ever, but I'm psyched. *StarCraft* was a LAN staple for me in college. And more than *WarCraft* or *C&C* or any of those other RTSes I played from dusk till dawn, it was the first one that made me go, "Damn, you can actually tell a good story through these things." All that Kerrigan assimilation stuff seriously punched me in the mouth.

JEFF: Yeah, agreed on *StarCraft*'s story. Though the fact that you played it in college, while I was already working here, kind of depresses me. Anyway, the Kerrigan assimilation stuff was badass. Honestly, when I think back on *StarCraft* now, I actually think more about the story than the game, which is just crazy talk. I've been meaning to play *Brood War* again just to refresh my memory about the storyline. How dorky is that?

SEAN: Extraordinarily. I think Wikipedia would probably be faster. Or you can pick up one of those novels that, like, takes place at the same time but shows events from a different perspective, like that of Arcturus Mengsk or Zergling Number 2,0357,240b. Very *Rashōmon*. Or Orson Scott Card. Or that one episode of *Mama's Family* where Vicki Lawrence gets knocked unconscious by a pot and Eunice, Naomi, and Ellen each tell their side of the story and make themselves look like they weren't responsible but they all really were, at least partially.

JEFF: You watch *Mama's Family*? And I actually hired you?

SHAWN: Sorry, still haven't played *StarCraft* and was napping over here. Let me check Wikipedia and catch up.... So yeah, uh, you're asking what do we really know about Mama? Maybe she's one of the Others? A Tailie?

RYAN: The smoke monster ate her.

DARREN: James W. Harper did the voice of the Dark Templar Protoss Zeratul. A major part of Mama's family tree: the Harpers. Thank you, Wikipedia, for making an otherwise boring day worthwhile.

SEAN: Actually, now that I'm looking at this Wikipedia refresher, I have no recollection of any of this. Who the f*** was Zeratul? Apparently, he assassinated the Cerebrate Zasz. OK. And that disrupted the Overmind's control over the Garm Brood, allowing Zeratul and the Overmind to come into mind contact, revealing the whereabouts of the Protoss homeworld Aiur, where the Overmind embedded itself into the crust of the planet. I swear, I beat this game and have no idea what any of those words mean. They could stick Sawyer in there and it'd make just as much sense. Could it be that I remember *StarCraft* having a "good story" just because of that one single moment that was cribbed from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, anyway? Locutus of Bug.

• The original *StarCraft* turns 10 this year—and it's long, long overdue for a follow-up.

SHAWN: That, and you were, what, 16 years old at the time?

SEAN: Errrrr...22. To incriminate me further, around this time, I also thought Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series was the pinnacle of literature. I used to study FAQs and play MUDs through my VAX. Um, now I'd like to turn this conversation around to the fact that you've never played *StarCraft*.

SHAWN: Let's not. I got my first computer in 2002.

JEFF: You're all fired. •

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Long Live Retail

Why it pays to still buy Games for Windows® titles the old-fashioned way

I used to think my friend Erik was crazy: Every time he wanted a new PC game, he'd visit 10 different stores trying to find a place that had it in stock instead of just buying on the Internet.

Hindsight's a funny thing, though. While I always felt online ordering was superior, over time, I've learned that maybe Erik wasn't so crazy after all. The state of online ordering is anything but ideal. For example, I've placed orders on major retail websites asking for games to be sent overnight, only to find that the order was delayed indefinitely. You won't face that problem at your local store. And, if the item isn't in stock, you can always take your money to the next shop and avoid the hassle of e-mailing customer service, only to receive a canned reply.

Shipping policies are an issue as well. Many places charge a flat rate per item. For instance: Two Games for Windows® titles typically weigh under a pound, but you're paying $10 extra to have them shipped to you. What's more, the advantages of up-front savings are starting to dwindle now that the government's cracking down on sales-tax loopholes. So you basically wind up paying more to get your game later than the average shopper. It's hard to argue in favor of online retailers given the current status quo.

Some folks will argue that they just can't find the game they're looking for at local retailers, and that online shops have a bigger selection. That was true a decade ago, but today, most neighborhood stores have their inventory listed online and will even place orders for you, so the game you want is waiting there right when you arrive. And if it isn't, well...your money's still in hand, and you don't have to fight to get it back.

Then there's the problem of possibly not getting the game you thought you'd ordered, or being unhappy with the condition it arrives in. Granted, both local and online outlets won't let you return a game unless it's defective. But if it is defective, you have a quick exchange policy waiting for you at your local store, rather than having to arrange for a mail-in return with online retailers. And who normally pays for the return postage? Yep—you do.

Local stores also allow you to see items for sale you normally wouldn't notice on a website. Furthermore, sometimes it helps to just pick up a new accessory and get a feel for it without having to stare at a picture and wonder how it will actually perform in your hands. Face it: In the case of specific peripherals, such as a 5.1 surround-sound system, would you really want to purchase on looks alone?

So, what are the advantages to buying online? I suppose you could find a rare or out-of-print item. Maybe you can find a better deal and save yourself a few bucks at the risk of major hassle. But as for me, I'll listen to my old friend Erik's advice and play the day games come out, not a week after everyone else. Crazy? Nah—nowadays, it's a gamer's most rational choice of all.

–Kevin J. Baird, www.videogamenews.com

Buy With Confidence

Games for Windows® fans get the royal treatment at retail

Millions of players worldwide already know the Games for Windows® brand stands for quality, compatibility, safety, and user-friendliness. But the ranks of the initiated will soon swell with new admirers of all ages and skill levels as PC gaming gets both a new look and hugely expanded in-store presence at leading electronics retailers.

Thanks to top chains like Wal-Mart, CompUSA, and Circuit City, the days of having to comb through piles of possible selections or hunt storewide in search of the perfect score are over. As part of Microsoft's ongoing commitment to quality and the consumer, Games for Windows® titles won't just be easier to spot at a glance, courtesy of enhanced, more vibrant packaging. They'll also be yours to sample on-demand in the form of hands-on demos and trailers. And, for that matter, they'll be clearly stocked in specific, dedicated sections, so you'll always know exactly where to find today's biggest blockbusters.

"With the launch of Windows Vista™ and DirectX® 10 technology, PC games are poised to deliver the most visually stunning gaming experience consumers have ever seen," explains John Rowe, merchandise manager, gaming and networking, Circuit City Stores, Inc. That's why you'll find dazzling Games for Windows display fixtures prominently located at the end of aisles throughout a significant number of the nationwide retailer's stores, with PC gaming buyers viewed as an invaluable asset. According to Rowe, "We increasingly see PC games as a viable competitor to next-generation gaming consoles, and want to show our customers the incredible leap forward in graphics that [they've] recently made."

With other major firms like GameStop already incorporating plans to roll out hundreds of equally eye-catching placements, including attractive kiosks where enthusiasts can immediately enjoy the latest award-winning interactive outings, a full-scale retail revolution is formally underway. Among the many tangible benefits you'll instantly recognize from these groundbreaking efforts:

Clearer Branding—Thanks to gorgeous, standardized packaging, all Games for Windows titles will now be immediately recognizable and stand out on the shelf. Determining whether games will run on your PC is also easier than ever, as CD- and DVD-based outings are clearly labeled as such, so you know you're getting the titles you want, the way you want. Comparing featured selections is accordingly effortless, helping you to save time and money on any shopping trip.

Greater Functionality—Easy to install, reference, or remove using the Games Explorer in Windows Vista, Games for Windows titles go through rigorous testing to deliver a superior level of

Going Casual

Shopping for family favorites is easier than ever

As a gaming authority, friends and family often look to me for recommendations. And even though I usually recommend free online titles, I typically suggest they purchase the boxed version, too: Bonuses like the ability to play offline and extra levels easily justify the low asking price. Besides, for those without high-speed Internet connections, the full-featured editions available at retail make an ideal substitute.

This being the case, you'll find me browsing the local computer superstore weekly looking for the latest award-winning outings—and I'm not just talking typical Games for Windows® titles. That's right: Nestled between all the first-person shooters and role-playing smashes is usually a sweet selection of the latest and greatest casual games. I love checking on the newest releases and hottest deals, then asking clerks for recommendations. Sometimes, I find titles I would have never discovered alone. What's more, I never miss the opportunity to commandeer a game kiosk to experience the game right then and there, and I rarely leave without several hit titles in hand.

So consider this a heads-up: Two of my top MSN Games (http://games.msn.com) favorites just hit store shelves, and both come highly recommended. Think **Mozaki Blocks®** and **Hexic®**, challenging puzzle games built by legendary designer Alexey Pajitnov, creator of Tetris®. Combining a unique, mind-bending experience with incredible production values, both quickly stand out in a crowd.

Hexic Deluxe puts an exciting twist on the match-three puzzler, challenging players to rotate hexagon-shaped tiles to create same-colored clusters. **Mozaki Blocks Deluxe** is a colorful block-matching head-scratcher where

every move must be precisely calculated. Both sport different modes of play, with each mode presenting new challenges and providing a totally different gaming experience.

That said, the next time you're out shopping for digital diversions, check the casual games section. You just might discover an all-new favorite game of your own!

–Julie Di Cesare, MSN Games, Writer

quality and performance. Made to work on Windows XP and Windows Vista, they're also fully compatible with awesome accessories like the Xbox 360™ Wireless Controller for Windows®, Habu™ laser gaming mouse or Microsoft Reclusa™ gaming keyboard. Play with assurance, knowing that any great Games for Windows title such as **Shadowrun®** or **Microsoft® Flight Simulator X** will wow right out of the box.

More Choices—Featuring everything from hardcore hits like **Halo® 2** for Windows Vista to casual gaming favorites, each store's dedicated Games for Windows section offers something for everyone. Here, you'll find both a brilliant range of software and supporting educational materials designed to help you get the most from your playtime experience. Planning a family game night now involves enhanced safety and simplicity, thanks to highlighted titles' full compatibility with Parental Controls built into Windows Vista.

First-Class Treatment—The Games for Windows retail experience isn't just receiving a sweeping makeover that reinforces PC gaming's role at the forefront of interactive entertainment. As part of these efforts, a multimillion-dollar investment on behalf of Microsoft to push the platform forward, sales personnel are also receiving specialized training to help expand the scope of their knowledge and expertise. Feel free to ask questions: Like in-store teasers and demo stations, they might even be the first to turn you on to a hip new game that's got everyone raving.

"PC gaming is clearly experiencing a renaissance," explains Celeste Murillo, category manager for Games for Windows and LIVE®. "Fans can walk into thousands of stores and feel as if they're being spoken to in a meaningful way. Making informed purchase decisions is easier than ever. And now anyone, including both casual and hardcore players, can immediately see the benefits of the enhanced gaming experience Windows Vista offers. The proof is in the pudding: Games for Windows finally have a distinct home at retail."

"Through our Games for Windows interactive solution, we're giving customers a chance to test drive some of the hottest PC games available," Rowe happily confirms. "We're confident that by teaming with Microsoft, we can deliver a great consumer experience."

The Rules Have Changed

Windows Vista™ and Xbox 360™ collide in groundbreaking FPS Shadowrun™

Long-awaited first-person shooter **Shadowrun**™ doesn't just mark the evolution of the FPS genre by introducing gameplay that rewards cleverness and cunning rather than twitch skills.

It also sees one of the initial debuts of a major new initiative: Games for Windows®—LIVE, which lets Windows Vista and Xbox 360 fans compete for the first time head-to-head against one another worldwide using a LIVE Gold account.

It's a key milestone not just for PC gamers, but also interactive entertainment as a whole, and we couldn't resist loading up a full clip of questions and putting Mitch Gitelman, studio manager at developer FASA, in our sights:

Q: What is Shadowrun?

A: "An intense, team-based first-person shooter combining ancient magic, modern weapons, and advanced technology in a unique way. **Shadowrun** isn't just about pointing your crosshairs and pulling the trigger. It's about using the right abilities and the right weapons at the right time to get the advantage in combat. It's really a thinking person's shooter."

Q: How does the LIVE system work on Windows? Is it just like Xbox LIVE®?

A: "It's not just like LIVE—it is LIVE, only on Windows Vista. You can enjoy voice chat, create a friends list, earn achievements...all the stuff that makes LIVE a great online games service. You even use the same gamertag. Additional features, like Marketplace, are coming later."

Q: Why aren't you including a single-player campaign?

A: "We believe that the core of our gameplay is the multiplayer mechanics. As we were creating prototypes for **Shadowrun**, we realized that the core multiplayer game completely stood on its own. It's that good."

Q: But Shadowrun is an RPG franchise—why adapt it as an FPS?

A: "True, **Shadowrun** started as an RPG, but it's also been a tactical-combat board game, a collectable card game, and an action-figure game. The world of **Shadowrun** is large, and there's a lot to do in it. If you ran a studio with a history of making groundbreaking and fun multiplayer action games that employed the lead designer of **Halo®**, the best FPS on console platforms, what would you do?"

Q: That makes perfect sense. But why not make a great shooter and call it something else?

A: "Because this is **Shadowrun**. It just takes place about 25 years before the stories found elsewhere. Not only will the world change, but game mechanics will evolve too when we introduce things like jacking your brain into a computer and traveling in the astral plane. There's plenty for a first-person-shooter player to learn and enjoy here. The rest will come in time."

Q: How many players does Shadowrun support?

A: "A maximum of 16 players per game, but you'll see a lot more flying around the battlefield. You can summon creatures to fight for you or strangle crystals to block entrances, and capture enemies or trees of life to magically heal you."

Q: Rumor has it you'll only ship with about eight to 10 maps. What's up?

A: "In **Shadowrun**, you can teleport through walls, floors and ceilings, glide across the battlefield, and spy on enemies through solid objects. It's never the same experience twice. When you have a finite set of solid mechanics that allow for experimentation and improvisation, you get a highly replayable situation-based gameplay model. It's like a classic board game: How many maps do you need in chess?"

IF THE GOVERNMENT HAS ITS WAY, YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO PLAY HALF THE GAMES IN THIS MAGAZINE.

Fight back at theeca.com

Entertainment
Consumers
Association

Tech

Awesome things in small packages

Samsung's Q1 line is way sexy, but like most UMPCs, it's gimped. Our advice: Think older games and emulators—or sign up for GameTap.

SHRINKAGE The saga of the incredible shrinking game machine:

In the May 2007 issue of *GFW* (#6), we cracked the case on small form-factor PCs. Were they suitable gaming rigs? Absolutely! In the June issue (#7), we helped set expectations for notebook gamers, breaking down what makes the "perfect" gaming laptop and the kind of games you can play. This month...the thrilling conclusion!

THE INCREDIBLE SHRIN

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Blinded by the LCD's Light
Despite needing to adjust it, Gateway's monitor impresses.

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AMD's DX10 Card
Nvidia has some DX10 competition—but was it worth the wait?

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Think your computer's got problems? You should try talking to Darren's PC sometime.

ONES FOR THE ROAD

In the previous two issues of *GFW*, we talked about how technology has made true PC gaming possible on smaller and smaller devices. Now it's time to get small with a capital S. We're talking real PCs that you can hold in one hand. And yes, we're even talking phones. The promise of getting your gaming fix anytime, anywhere. But there's a price to this portability, both in terms of cash and power. We're going to show you how to get the best on both fronts for those who absolutely need to play. ■ **Joe Rybicki**

THE UMPC

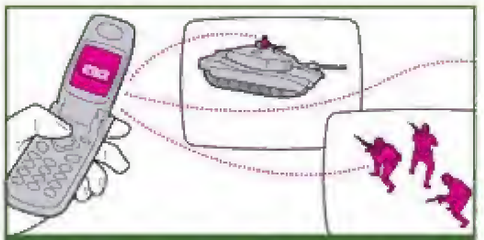
When Microsoft announced its Origami project—a platform specifically designed for tiny handheld PCs—the public stood up and took notice. Then the first Ultra Mobile PCs (UMPCs) started showing up, and the public sat back down. These early models may have looked cyber-chic, but they had some downsides: processors that ran at sub-1GHz speeds, a limp half a gig of memory (or less), batteries with an insane two-hour run time, and price tags of well over $1,000. Many wondered what a 7-inch screen could do that couldn't be done on either a laptop or a PDA. The future looked bleak for the platform. Unless manufacturers could both boost the specs and lower the price of entry, the UMPC seemed destined to languish in tech limbo, too small to be powerful but too big to be truly portable, and entirely too expensive all around.

Fortunately for nerds on the bleeding edge, the latest UMPCs continue closing in on that sweet spot of price, power, and portability. Take the Q1 Ultra from Samsung (www.samsung.com), the newest iteration of one of the very first UMPCs on the market. With the machine squeezing in a full gig of RAM, a 60GB hard drive, and Intel's brand-new Ultra Mobile A110 processor, the $1,200 MSRP becomes a little easier to swallow, even with the CPU's anemic 800MHz clock speed.

Or consider the HTC Shift (www.htc.com), a sexy minilaptop due out this fall. Final specs and pricing are still on the way, but this snappy little number is expected to pack in a 1.2GHz processor, a full gig of RAM, and a 30GB hard drive. Pricing will probably weigh in at well over a grand, but with the machine packing in a real (albeit tiny) QWERTY keyboard and connectivity options (cellular, Wi-Fi, and Bluetooth) out the wazoo, you can see where that money will be going.

Other UMPCs are out or on the way from Asus (www.asus.com) and TabletKiosk (www.tabletkiosk.com), and while the tech is still fairly bleeding-edge—with prices to match—the platform is definitely moving in a more consumer-friendly direction. Sexy supersmall notebooks. Great. But what does this all mean to gaming?

Don't set your expectations too high. In its current incarnation, the UMPC is a fine platform for mining the classics, but with processors topping out in the low 1GHz range and no video power to speak of, you're not going to be firing up anything remotely processor-intensive from the last, oh, three years or so. Our suggestions: indie games and freeware, which are widely available online (check out Free Play, pg. 44, for the latest finds), or think about a subscription to GameTap (www.gametap.com) for a wide selection of older >



ANY GAME, ANYWHERE

One trend you can expect to see more of in the world of ultramobile gaming is cross-platform implementations of the same game. Picture respecing your *WOW* character's talents on the bus ride home from work. Or monitoring your MMO auctions from your cell phone. This is part of the vision of Microsoft's Live Anywhere, and it offers some really intriguing possibilities.

In an interview with *EGM*, Chris Satchell, the general manager of Microsoft's Game Developers Group, spoke enthusiastically about this concept. "I do believe this type of 'transmedia' gaming experience will be popular in the future," he said, "and the industry is steadily working toward it. I think you will see casual-gaming extensions of large games that feed back into the core experience coming from one side, cross-platform seamless play from another, and the extension of MMO worlds to other devices from a third." The center of that triangle is you, the gamer, connected to your games *at all times*. It's like living in the future—except without the evil robots.

KING GAME MACHINE

Part three: The whole world in your hands

AT WHAT PRICE, MOBILITY?

This is likely to be a watershed year for UMPCs, but the cost of entry still needs to come way down to encourage widespread adoption. Here's the rundown of current models and prices as of press time.

eo v7110
SPECS: **1GHz VIA C7-M ULV, 512MB RAM, 40GB hard drive**
MANUFACTURER: **TabletKiosk**
PRICE: **$900**
URL: **www.tabletkiosk.com**

Q1 Ultra
SPECS: **800MHz Ultra Mobile, 1GB RAM, 60GB hard drive**
MANUFACTURER: **Samsung**
PRICE: **$1,200**
URL: **www.samsung.com**

Q1P
SPECS: **1GHz Pentium M ULV, 1GB RAM, 60GB hard drive**
MANUFACTURER: **Samsung**
PRICE: **~$1,200**
URL: **www.samsung.com**

R2H
SPECS: **900MHz Celeron M ULV, up to 768MB RAM, 60GB hard drive**
MANUFACTURER: **Asus**
PRICE: **~$1,000**
URL: **www.asus.com**

games. With built-in wireless and cell connectivity and the handheld design, the UMPC is the perfect platform for catching up on all those games you never had a chance to play. So as long as you've got a USB port available, just pop in a gamepad and you're good to go.

CELL ON EARTH

Of course, one gaming platform's even more portable: the cell phone. All right, so most cell-phone games have amounted to a couple rounds of *Snakes*, blackjack, or some forgettable Java-based nonsense—diversions of last resort, when all other gaming options were inaccessible. Like when you're stuck on a bus, playing some horribly gimped version of solitaire—hardly what we'd consider "fun" in the classical sense, and not too far removed from being caught in a bear trap in the middle of the woods facing the prospect of gnawing off your own leg.

Things have changed. While you still probably wouldn't turn to a cell phone if you had a perfectly good (or at least halfway-decent) gaming PC sitting nearby, these do-everything devices are well on their way to becoming a legitimate gaming platform.

Consider Nokia. While the N-Gage was an impressive flop (due in no small part to its bizarre design) and the N-Gage QD failed to overcome its sidetalkin' predecessor's bad PR, the software that powered the thing was pretty legit. So we're cautiously optimistic that Nokia is developing new software based on the N-Gage for implementation in current and future handsets, as well as an all-new game download service. And according to a report in the February 16 *Wall Street Journal*, the company is also developing a new gaming-friendly phone.

But is there really a market for serious gaming on a cell phone? Nvidia seems to think so: The company has been quietly upgrading its GoForce chip, designed specifically for gaming and multimedia on cell phones. The latest model, the GoForce 6100, claims to support surround sound and "console-class" gaming. Now, since the 6100 has yet to be seen in the wild, we're not sure *which* console Nvidia's referring to—could be the Atari 2600 for all we know. And surround sound in a cell phone, it must be said, seems like a seriously weird idea. But the fact remains: Enough big names are jumping aboard this whole cell-phone gaming bandwagon that, sooner or later, we *will* see more gamingcentric handsets.

So what are the best phones for gaming *right now*? Unfortunately, there's no easy answer. The market is so fragmented, and so dynamic, that available gaming platforms—and the phones they run on—are in constant flux. Newer is usually better, but with cell phones it's not all about power; it's also about operating system.

If you're looking for the widest selection of games, you want a handset that supports Java. It's included in phones offered by most carriers, and enjoys the widest developer support. The downside: As a gaming platform, Java just isn't that powerful. It's versatile, yes, but you're not going to be mistaking a Java game for a console game any time soon.

So if you're looking for something more closely resembling the game experiences you're used to (as opposed to the game experiences your *grandma* is used to), you'll want a phone that supports the more powerful BREW operating system instead of Java. But due to strict licensing requirements, BREW hasn't been as widely embraced as Java...meaning you won't find as many games available on your phone, and you won't find as many third-party apps, either. With Verizon selling only BREW-driven phones these days, you can expect the platform to become more widespread in the future. But how far in the future is anyone's guess.

Other cell software platforms exist—Symbian and Windows Mobile being the two biggest—but in terms of widespread adoption it's primarily down to Java and BREW. For now.

EXPLOITING PORTABILITY

Even in a perfect world where cell-phone games look every bit as good as PC or console games, you'll still be playing on a tiny, tiny screen. And even as Ultra Mobile PCs grow more powerful and less expensive, their bigger brethren will always outpace them in terms of balancing power and price. So why even consider these as potential gaming platforms?

Because they can do things your desktop can't. With great portability comes great connectivity—and this connectivity is leading to some very interesting ideas in game design. Most notable of these trends is the idea of location-based gaming; these games draw information about your physical, real-world location and incorporate real-world activity into the game world. While this type of game is still in its infancy, one example currently on the market is *Swordfish*, a GPS-enabled fishing game from Boost Mobile (www.boostlive.com) in which you wander city streets looking for schools of fish to reel in.

This is just the beginning. Your World Games is putting the finishing touches on *The Shroud* (www.shroudgame.com), an anime-inspired mobile RPG that uses real-world location data to dole out special quests and items. And at the 2006 International Mobile Gaming Awards, the grand prize went to a game called *Triangler*, which enlists teams of up to 100 players to attempt to "trap" members of the opposite team by surrounding them on three sides out in the real world.

In these very pages, we've also talked about the concept of transmedial gaming. Imagine connecting you (on your cell phone) with other buddies playing the same game on a PC or console—a different experience for every platform, all connecting to the same game world. Sound too crazy to be true? Microsoft is tapping those possibilities with Live. It's just a little further out (see "Any Game, Anywhere," pg. 95).

The superconnectivity of ultraportable devices is what makes these kinds of ideas possible, and it's a trend that's only going to grow. Given the hardware limits of these diminutive devices, it's only natural that designers forgo cutting-edge graphics and sound in favor of simple, imaginative gameplay. That is the strength of the tiny games platform: As underpowered as it is, it forces designers to strip down their games to pure, accessible entertainment.

As small as these devices may be, their impact on future gaming trends will no doubt be huge—and it's coming sooner than you think.●

BREW VS. JAVA: BATTLE OF THE BEANS

Figuring out which phones support which caffeinated format is a bit of a hit-or-miss proposition. Here are a few highly rated phones in each category to help you on your way.

JAVA

enV
MANUFACTURER: **LG**
PRICE: **$200 (with contract)**
CARRIER: **Verizon**

SCH-u740
MANUFACTURER: **Samsung**
PRICE: **$180 (with contract)**
CARRIER: **Verizon**

VX8300
MANUFACTURER: **LG**
PRICE: **$100 (with contract)**
CARRIER: **Verizon**

BREW

RAZR V3xx
MANUFACTURER: **Motorola**
PRICE: **$100 (with contract)**
CARRIER: **Cingular**

5300 XpressMusic
MANUFACTURER: **Nokia**
PRICE: **$100 (with contract)**
CARRIER: **T-Mobile**

W810i
MANUFACTURER: **Sony Ericsson**
PRICE: **$170 (with contract)**
CARRIER: **Cingular**

GATEWAY FPD2485W

With monitors, size ain't everything—but it helps

MANUFACTURER: **Gateway** PRODUCT NAME: **FPD2485W** PRICE: **$580** URL: **www.gateway.com**

REVIEW

As in life, there's more to monitors than simply width and girth. Gateway's 24-inch FPD2485W realizes that. It borders that size sweet spot between ludicrous (30 inches) and merely big (20 inches) while hitting on what high-end gamers look for in an LCD.

Obviously, the main draw is the crisp native 1,920x1,200 resolution and widescreen aspect ratio—but how does it look? Honestly, I'm a little blue. The out-of-the box color temperature veers toward the cool side, resulting in a slightly murky hue, despite how well the blindingly bright LCD panel lights a dark room. A crazy-cool touch-sensitive panel gives easy access to the display's features (more on that in a sec), but it wasn't until I calibrated colors within the graphics-card software that the initial haze burned away.

Getting over that hump, the FPD2485W's test scores blew away even Gateway's estimates. A 1,674:1 contrast ratio and luminance rated at 583 candelas per meter squared (cd/m²) mean it's not quite spotlight-bright, but definitely more than you need—and it's great for gaming. Some online reviews report snags, but no ghosting or blurring issues surfaced during our extended play sessions. Also, videophiles need to approach with caution. Faroudja's DCDi video-processing chip lurks inside, but our resident video snob Loyd Case pooh-poohed the initial performance and extra time required for proper color calibration.

Gateway gooses the FPD2485W with a number of features—some useful, some not so much—to justify the price. There are a couple USB ports and a gang of inputs (DVI, VGA, component, and composite—but no HDMI) that are especially handy when console gamers need an extra place to set up shop. The sexy touch menu makes it a breeze to navigate (or see two inputs picture-in-picture), although sometimes, the monitor gets fooled. When I tried to switch between two PCs, the monitor occasionally hibernated, not seeing the signal—and since you can only change the inputs again onscreen, I was screwed. The only solution: Yank the monitor's power cord and start up again. It happened rarely—so don't worry too much.

By far the most useless feature for gamers has got to be the swiveling display. Rotating the screen 90 degrees is great for reading Web pages, monkeying with photos, or dealing with documents. For everything else, it's just plain dumb.

A number of factors make us recommend this monitor. It's priced right and, with a little tweaking, provides a great picture. If that doesn't impress your friends, just rotate the screen. That'll shut 'em up—or just make 'em mock you even more.

• **Darren Gladstone**

VERDICT

- **Solid construction; bright, crisp picture; funky touch-panel controls.**
- **The base is a little blah; requires some color tweaking out of the box.**

8\10

GOOD

Games for Windows

EVEN THOUGH IT REQUIRES A LITTLE COLOR-TWEAKING TLC, THIS MONITOR REMAINS A GREAT PICK FOR GAMERS WHO SEE THE BIG PICTURE

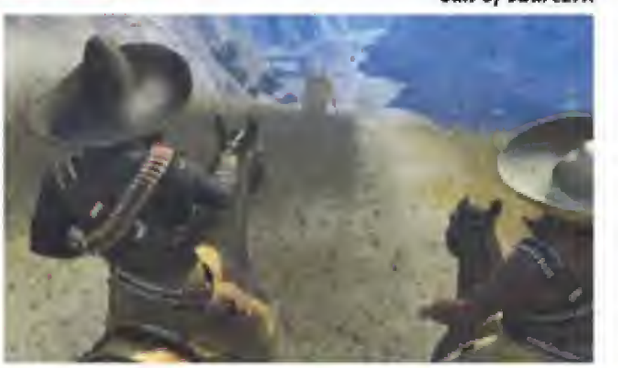
BATTLE OF THE BADASS MONITORS

If Gateway's FPD2485W display doesn't have you convinced to upsize, Dell offers a great 24-inch performer as well: the 2407WFP. Feature for feature, the two stack up pretty evenly. Even the color scaling runs neck and neck. However, we like Gateway's LCD panel a little better. The biggest differences we found were in contrast. Check out the chart below for a blow-by-blow, number-by-number comparison.

Display	Gateway FPD2485W	Dell 2407WFP
Max/min contrast ratio	1.15	1.13
VESA min/max dark value	89.2%	90%
VESA min/max bright value	85%	90%
Average contrast ratio (X:1)	1,674	1,039
Average dark value (cd/m²)	0.3	0.29
Average bright value (cd/m²)	583.3	300.5

No doubt you're scratching your head, wondering what the hell all these numbers mean. The short version: The higher the number, the better. The Gateway has a more dynamic range—a wider gap between the darkest black and the brightest white (and a funky variant that has a hard time adjusting the gamma levels smoothly). So, if you buy this monitor, keep in mind that the brightness is cranked way high. Go into your graphics-card software and dial it down some to keep from burning out your retinas.

Slightly bigger than the 8800 GTS, and yet smaller than a ferret, this should fit in your PC—and not chew on the cables.



Want to see the DX10 future? Look no further than... *Call of Juarez*?!?

FINALLY!

ATI releases its long-awaited DirectX 10 graphics cards

MANUFACTURER: **ATI** PRODUCT: **Radeon HD 2900 XT** PRICE: **$399** URL: **http://ati.amd.com**

REVIEW

Last summer, if you asked us when we would see new graphics cards based on the next-gen R600 architecture from ATI, we'd have told you "this fall." All signs pointed to a release ahead of Windows Vista. Then, last fall, Nvidia released its DX10 graphics cards with the GeForce 8800 GTX and GTS. Microsoft followed up with the release of Vista at the end of January (required to run DirectX 10), and still no word from ATI. Now acquired by processor giant AMD, ATI finally pushes its DirectX 10 products out the door. The first release: the Radeon HD 2900 XT. The just-over-$400 top-of-the-line card is on store shelves, with midrange 2600 and budget 2400 cards likely hitting the streets right around the time you grab this issue with your power-hungry hands. There's even a full line of notebook graphics chips coming, also hitting the market in the June/July time frame, based on this new architecture.

XTRAS

For even more gory details on the Radeon HD 2900 XT architecture and further benchmarks, visit GFW08.1UP.com. You big dork.

1UP NETWORK

NOT A PC 360

So what's new? Only everything. The R600 (the code name for the graphics processor in the HD 2900 XT) borrows quite a bit from the GPU built in to the Xbox 360, also designed by ATI. It's certainly much more than just "the PC version of the Xbox GPU" though. A new bidirectional ring bus memory controller provides a 512-bit memory interface, wider than on any other graphics card. The best previous Radeon cards had a 256-bit memory bus and that high-end GeForce 8800 GTX has a 384-bit bus. Wider bus means more data at the same memory clock speed, so the 825MHz GDDR3 memory on the HD 2900 XT gives us a whopping 106 gigabytes per second of memory bandwidth. That's huge!

The memory controller feeds data into a very fast triangle and pixel setup engine that includes a programmable tessellation unit—the same one found in the Xbox 360's GPU. This programmable unit can dissect individual triangles into hundreds more, so a game developer could smash a 1,000-triangle character mesh into half a million very tiny triangles without breaking a sweat. The idea is that you use that finer-mesh character along with a special texture called a displacement map to actually create more detailed geometry without having to store a half-million-triangle character

THE RADEON HD 2900 XT COSTS ABOUT AS MUCH AS THE GEFORCE 8800 GTS—BUT RUNS ABOUT 20-30 PERCENT FASTER.

BY THE NUMBERS

	Radeon HD 2900 XT	GeForce 8800 GTS	Radeon X1950 XTX
3DMark06 score	11650	9896	7117
Prey	54	45	42
F.E.A.R.	55	54	50
Company of Heroes	82	61	54
Supreme Commander	29	28	26
Call of Duty 2	61	40	41

*All games benchmarked in frames per second at 1,920x1,200 with 4x antialiasing and 8x anisotropic filtering (except no AA/AF on *COH*).
**3DMark06's raw number score comes from running test software at default resolution and settings.

in memory. This sort of hardware tessellation function isn't part of DirectX 10, but it's scheduled to be part of the next DirectX. The setup engines feed "threads" of vertex, pixel, and geometry shader commands to a huge array of 320 "stream processors," what we used to call pixel shader or vertex shader units. That sounds like a lot more than the 128 similar stream processors in the GeForce 8800 GTX or 96 in the 8800 GTS, and it is—just remember that Nvidia runs its stream processor units at more than twice the speed of the chip's core clock rate.

FLEXIBLE UNITS

The Radeon HD 2000 series unifies these shader units—these units can operate on pixel shaders, vertex shaders, DX10's new geometry shaders, or nongraphics-related stuff like physics or protein folding. That means the card has flexible muscle to distribute as the CPU sees fit. The HD 2900 XT's 320 stream processors group into four Single Instruction, Multiple Data (SIMD) banks of 16 "blocks" of processors. Each block contains five floating-point scalar processors, a branch execution unit (speeds up shaders with conditionals and branches), and some general purpose registers. All those shader units pull their data from 16 texture/vertex management units that are equipped with L1 texture and vertex caches, and a shared L2 cache as well. Sixteen render back-ends draw out pixels, perform depth buffer and stencil buffer checks, and blend antialiasing samples. There are big improvements all around. The texture units are far more efficient, especially when dealing with floating-point textures. The render back-ends offer faster depth and stencil text operations, better Z-buffer compression, and a programmable antialiasing resolve system that makes available some new AA modes.

We could go on all day about all the new technology in the chip (and trust me, I almost did), but all you're going to care about is how well it performs. Unfortunately, there aren't any *real* DirectX 10 games on the market to compare the first round of DX10 cards. Still, dropping the HD 2900 XT side by side with GeForce 8800 cards, both run today's DX9 games like gangbusters. Interestingly, ATI provides no $550 to $600 card to compete with the GeForce 8800 GTX. The Radeon HD 2900 XT sits at the top of the line at $400, comparable to the GeForce 8800 GTS. Compared to that card, ATI's new Radeon runs anywhere from roughly the same speed to over 50 percent faster—depending on the game and settings. Overall, we would characterize it as about 20 to 30 percent faster, though our early drivers showed a couple of performance problems in one or two games.

The 9.5-inch-long card is just a wee bit longer than the 8800 GTS, too. So if you have a case that won't fit the GeForce 8800 GTX card but will fit the smaller GTS, you should be in good shape with this one as well. The major upside, besides the excellent performance, is that everyone who buys an HD 2900 XT gets a scratch-off card with a Steam code unlocking *Half-Life 2: Episode 2*, *Portal*, and *Team Fortress 2* for free (and *Day of Defeat: Source* for free while you wait for their release). Not shabby, the way pack-ins go these days. The big downside is power draw. This card has two power connectors, one eight-pin and one six-pin. You only need two six-pin plugs to operate it at normal speeds, but the overclocking part of the control panel only appears if you plug in one eight-pin power connector. At idle and under full load, this card draws a good 45W more than the 8800 GTX and 65W more than the 8800 GTS. Ouch! For the targeted high-end gamer market, this won't be a big problem, but you'll want to think twice if you're on the edge with a 450W power supply. If I were going to the store today to buy a $400 card that'd perform well out of the box, I'd probably buy an 8800 GTS card. Give it some driver tweaks and two months time—it's a safe bet the 2900 XT may be my pick. • **Jason Cross**

VERDICT

- **Good performance; Valve game bundle; lots of potential for DX10 performance.**
- **Requires a nuclear reactor for overclocking; drivers still need tuning.**

8\10

GOOD

Games for Windows

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WE SPEAK G33K

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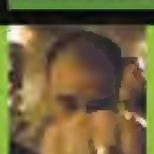
GLADSTONED

PC: A survivor's tale

COLUMN



Darren Gladstone

Think you can stump Darren? E-mail Mr. Know-It-All at darren_gladstone@ziffdavis.com

***A couple months** back, I asked you to send in your questions. My first victim: Tim Hilliard. As Tim beefs up his Pentium III, he's praying for the decrepit desktop to support* World in Conflict. *Will this RTS-head's Frankenrig work—or is it time to pony up for a new PC? According to the fine folks at Vivendi, I'm told, "If your machine can run* Battlefield 2, *[it] can run* World in Conflict." *Well, that's a start. There are even rumblings of full DX10 support. Of course, you probably won't be able to reach my machine's godlike resolutions—but you probably don't work over your computer as much as I do. Not everybody slams in untested hardware with shoddy drivers and plays crap games for days on end. Then again, I hate myself. And my PC.*

"He's gone. Quick, pull the plug! Just end my misery before Darren comes back.

I've put up with a *lot* in my day: long nights, working weekends.... Yeah, sure, he's generous as hell. It's nice that he hooks me up with all sorts of primo parts to keep an old rig like me in good shape. RAM, 8800 GTX boards, 1,000-watt power supplies—you name it.

But for all the sweet gear Darren slides my way, he sneaks in useless crap he knows I don't need. Thanks for the buggy $250 network card. Y'know, the one that looks killer and promises to work better for gaming than the NIC already in your PC. Tell you what, Darren—I'll sell you a $300 bottle of water. It works great, way better than what you drink every day. Jackass. Oh, and don't think I've forgotten about that physics doohickey. 'But it's gonna be the future of gaming,' he whines. I really enjoy running games that turn 2-ton girders into Styrofoam props. Another $150 well spent! Great. Fine, really. Thanks for that.

It isn't even just the emotional abuse. He batters me. Broken keyboards and smashed mice are just the start. When the dumbass isn't overcrowding my hard drive with midget porn and recording TV shows, he's asphyxiating it with spyware, antispyware, and two operating systems (see "The Case of XP v. Vista," above). I'm surprised I still run.

Speaking of barely working, here's Mr. Wonderful himself, smelling like a booze-soaked foot. Must've been yet another pre-E3 happy hour press event tonight. Hang on; there's a disc in his hand....

Aww, fer the lovea...*Halo 2*? Again?!? Chrissakes, man! Didn't he get enough of that back in 2004 when it came out for the Xbox? Seeing chuggy framerates and shellacked textures in a two-year-old game really gets you all hopped up? I know the game needs reviewing, but c'mon already! After the 30-plus hours he's played this mess, one'd figure he might actually *win* a multiplayer match. Give it up! Unless, of course, *someone's* trying to unlock the Internet Douche Achievement. Keep up the great work!

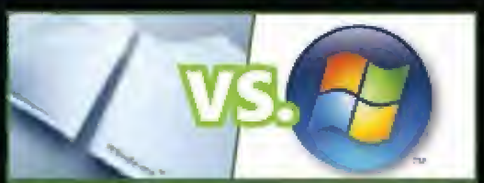
Oy. Maybe he should go back to playing slightly less demanding games. *Unicorn Rainbow Tycoon* sounds right up your alley. Oh, thank God, he's done. He's off to punish some other victim. Maybe his notebook or the Xbox 360. Anything but me.

Whew!

Here comes Amy. This is cake—she checks her e-mail, sends a few pictures to friends and her mom. No big deal. Wait. What's this? Perezhilton.com? Oh...crap...I....

Darren! Hey! Get back here! I love your William Shatner MP3s! You're not a total perv! Please, play that stupid *Halo* game again! See!?! I'll even start it up for you! I don't know if I can deal with another friggin' blog news story about Paris Hilton or *American Idol*!

Say, those shoes are cute...no...I mean, uh... Memory Overflow."



THE CASE OF XP V. VISTA

Fun with dual-booting

My jammed-up hard drive might not appreciate it, but to ensure a 95 to 100 percent success rate playing games these days, I needed to create a dual-boot PC. Until Vista squares up backward compatibility on some games and drivers (looking at you, Nvidia!), you might consider doing the same. It's so simple even a trained chimp can do it!

1. You need a blank slate, so grab all the required drivers (save 'em to a CD or floppies—anything) before formatting your PC.
2. Start by booting the computer with the Windows XP install disc.
3. Select the hard drive you want to partition—and set aside at least 30GB so that you can install the OS, some basic apps, and a couple games. Remember, kids: 1,000MB = 1GB!
4. Grab yourself a drink and let XP go to town. Booze makes installation times fly!
5. It's Vista's turn—and this part is even easier. Drop in the disc and hit "Install Now."
6. Select "Custom" and plop the OS in the "Unallocated Space." Load a RAID driver if you need it, then wait for the install magic to happen all over again.
7. From now on, you have a choice: Vista or some "Earlier Version of Windows"—because, apparently, XP was too long a name.

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GREENSPEAK

Because we have the extra page

LIVE DEAD

I don't know why you say *Halo*, I say goodbye

COLUMN

Jeff Green

See that gray hair? It was brown when *Halo 2* first came out. Point and laugh at jeff_green@ziffdavis.com.

Dear Bill Gates,

Hello, sir! How are you? I hope you are doing well. I am doing well, too. Well, most of the time. I still have that weird rash on my groin I told you about in my last letter (I'm surprised you didn't write me back about that!), but also, well, I was hoping I could take a moment of your time to talk to you about this whole "Games for Windows" thing that you and your company started. I assume you know about it, unless you're one of those bosses who zones out in his office all day while the proles do all the work. Believe me, I understand! I haven't put in a decent day's work at this magazine in years! But hey, that's what the proles are for, right, sir? Ha ha! High five!

So it's been about eight months now since we changed our name from *Computer Gaming World* to *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine*, and let me tell you, so far, it has been great. I love being partners with you. Still, there are just a couple of *tiny* issues I'd like to get off my chest. Don't take them as complaints, though, because, like I said, I love my job and the work you do—and have I mentioned that I've always admired your haircut? Also, my wife says hi and told me to remind you again that she's a big fan of Microsoft Notepad.

So, anyway, here's the thing. You know how last year, you got up on stage at E3 to talk about Games for Windows and Live Anywhere (the PC part of which is now called Games for Windows Live)? That was awesome. You had an auditorium full of videogame writers swooning as you demonstrated how you were bringing your great Xbox Live service to PC gamers, which, seriously, is like the best idea you've had since the C: prompt. Dude! I can get Achievements on my PC? I can see what my friends are playing and join them for multiplayer matches—even across platforms? I can check out cool stuff on Live Arcade? Sign me up!

Except, well—don't. Not now. Not till you fix stuff. And I mean *a lot* of stuff. Because as the details are starting to come out now about Games for Windows Live, sir, well—how do I put this nicely? Let's try this: *it sucks ass.* I'm not exactly sure what kind of meetings you guys have been having, and what kind of mushrooms are involved, but the more I hear, the more I am convinced that:

1) You guys are just kidding around at our expense and are going to reveal the real plan soon. (Oh, *you!*)

2) You secretly hate PC gamers and are doing everything you can to make us mad on purpose.

3) You truly don't get us at all and just need a little guidance.

Let's start with the price. I won't even mention that to use GFW Live, you need Windows Vista—and to use Windows Vista, you probably need a new PC. I'm gonna skip right past that part. But if I hadn't, I'd have added that right there, we'd already be looking at a large chunk of change. Which would make the $50 a year for a Gold Live account seem like a pittance. It *is* a pittance. The problem is that it's still $50 more than free, which is what PC gamers are used to paying for certain basic services you offer—such as in-game voice chat and player matchmaking. And if there's one way to piss people off, it's telling them they have to pay for stuff they're used to getting for free.

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN TAYLOR

But let's say we give you that one. Let's concede that services such as Achievements may be worth about $1 a week. What really matters is the games. So let's go down the list of all the third-party developers who have lined up to be part of this great program. Oh, wait—that's right. There is no list. Not one company has signed up, and worse, certain crucially important game developers, like Epic and Valve—who could have given this the legitimacy it needs—have come out openly against the idea. That's what we like to call a "warning sign," sir.

With no third-party games to play, GFW Live boils down, right now, to three of your own games: *Halo 2*, *Shadowrun*, and *Uno*, kind of a Larry, Moe, and Curly of Who Cares for PC gamers. Don't get me wrong about *Halo 2*. It was a classic. In 2005. On the original Xbox. But now? And I have to upgrade my operating system to play it, even though the graphics look all of its 2.5 years old? How about if I just pay you $50 a year to just step on my head instead?

I've just barely scratched the surface, sir. But the problem, really, is one of perception. When this Games for Windows initiative started, Microsoft sounded so positive and bullish about PC gaming that many of us—well, the less manly ones, anyway—cried tears of joy. You cared about us after all! But this GFW Live stuff is telling a very different story. As are the defensive interviews from your underlings. When your message changes in just one year from an enthusiastic "Wait till you guys see this!" to a defensive "Look, we're not screwing you. And if you don't like it, don't do it"—then I humbly submit you have lost your way.

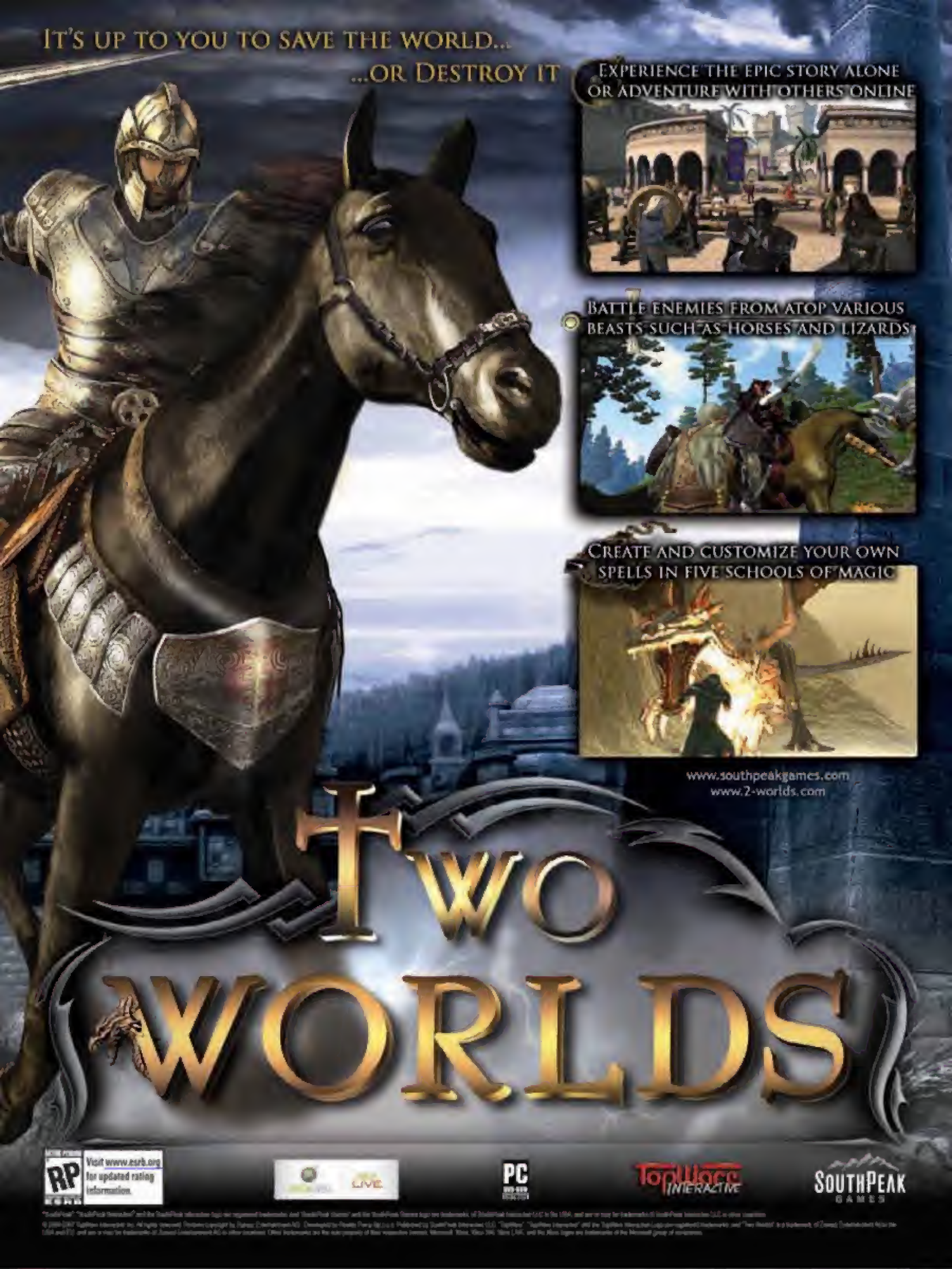
Back up, sir. Regain the momentum. Commit an act of generosity and commitment for us weary PC gamers: Make GFW Live totally free, without tiers. You're already making us buy Vista for it—that's enough, don't you think? You tell us you care about us? So show it already.

Your humble servant,

Jeff

P.S. I still love Minesweeper! *And you, sir! Please don't fire me!*

Games for Windows: The Official Magazine (ISSN 1933-6160) is published monthly by Ziff Davis Media, Inc. 28 East 28th Street, New York, NY 10016. Periodicals Postage Paid at New York, NY 10016 and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine*, P.O. Box 57167, Boulder, CO 80322-7167. Canadian GST registration number is 865286033. Publication Mail Agreement No.40009221. Return Undeliverable Canadian Addresses to P.O. Box 503, RPO West Beaver Creek, Richmond Hill, ON L4B 4R6. Printed in the U.S.A.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